



the social system by Orange Pens and Messy Hands

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Pairings: Eleven/Jane H./Mike W.

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Summary: In which El is pretty cool, Mike and the rest of the Party aren't. But it just so happens that El needs a tutor. What happens when Mike finds out someone "too cool for him" is actually completely different than what he thought she was? Will she bring them up a couple of steps in the social system? Or will she look down on the "nerds" like everyone else? Highschool AU. Multi-chap.

1. chapter one

we're going old school with the AN at the front today. this is the first chapter in a multi-chap series mainly focused around mileven but with Lumax also. i've never really done well with multi-chaps before, mainly sticking with one-shots, but i might as well try it out, it could be fun. I'm gonna try my best to be consistent with an upload schedule. hopefully i'll be able to upload atleast one chapter every sunday. i'm not sure how many chapters this is going to be, but i'm hoping atleast six, although ten would be ideal. again, this is my first time doing a multi-chap so any and all feedback would be crazy good. but all mistakes are mine and i hope you all enjoy. (also the AN is only going to be at the front for this chapter only. every other AN will be at the end, like normal) oh, also the name could be subject to change. I have no idea how i feel about the name *the social system*, if you guys like it i'll keep it. although it is kinda growing on me... also if you see any spelling/grammar mistakes and any awkwardly phrased sentences, let me know, i'll try and fix them asap...maybe i could find a beta reader

Words w/out AN: 4591

Pairing(s): Mileven, Lumax

I own nothing.

the social system: chapter one

Mike looked over his answers for his math test, flipping through the pages to double and triple-check that each answer is correct.

It kind of sucked that there was a test on the first day of school, but his teacher, Mrs. Sanders, explained that the results of this test wouldn't affect their current mark. It was just being used to evaluate each student's level of skill so she would know how to help each student individually.

His period before this class, calculus, was a spare. So it was kind of

jarring to go from doing nothing straight into doing a test.

It didn't really matter to Mike. A test was a test. Which meant he answered each question and made sure he's right.

Each question seemed pretty simple to Mike. That either meant he knew what he was doing, or he was going to get every question wrong.

He looked around the class to see how far through the test his classmates have made it. It seemed like everyone was more or less on the second and final page, but he saw a couple of people still on the first page.

"Excuse me." Mrs. Sanders called out from the front of the class. "Eyes on your own test please."

Mike's head swivelled to the front of the class so fast, he was surprised he didn't get whiplash. He blushed as his eyes grew wide in a shocking fashion.

Did Mrs. Sanders think he was cheating? Mike thought to himself. He wasn't cheating, he swears!

Mike tries to get a better look at Mrs. Sanders but a student's head is partially blocking his view. He leans a bit to the right to look around the kid and notices Mrs. Sanders scowling in his general direction.

Shit. He thought. She totally thinks he was cheating.

Mike has never cheated on a test before in his life. Why would he start now on a diagnostic test that wasn't even for marks?

Maybe he could explain to his teacher that he was just casually glancing around? Yeah, because that sounded believable.

Mike's heart rate quickened as he thought of the possible outcomes for this situation. Maybe Mrs. Sanders wouldn't report him? Cheating was a serious offence in this school. Serious enough to get you suspended and kicked off your sports teams and after-school clubs.

Oh gosh. What would Mike do without the AV Club? That was by far

his favourite school club. He was the president for Christ's sake.

It was a chill time for him and his best friends to hang out and relax.

Mike couldn't focus on the test in front of him anymore. Being labelled a cheater could ruin the rest of his academic career for him.

As class drew closer and closer to an end he tried to draw his attention to his test. He looked it over the best he could one last time and shakily handed his test in, waiting for the scolding from Mrs. Sanders for this whole cheating misunderstanding.

Instead, all he received was a tight-lipped smile and a "thank you."

He stumbled away shocked, expecting his first-ever scolding.

Maybe this was just a misunderstanding then... Maybe she wasn't talking to me?

The bell rang as he contemplated what could have just happened. He walked back to his desk and grabbed his bag.

Maybe he was just overreacting?

El Hopper brushed by him, handing her test in also.

"El, I'd like to talk to you after class about the incident that occurred between you and the person in front of you's test."

Mike didn't mean to eavesdrop. That sounded like a private conversation that they needed to have, but he was just within earshot. Half the class had already left and the other half was too busy preparing to leave to notice the teacher's request.

What incident did El have with the person in front of her's test?

Mike slung his bag over his shoulder and nodded a goodbye to Mrs. Sanders, relieved there was no reprimand for his casual glancing. His bag felt lighter for some reason?

The person in front of you's test...

Wait...Didn't Mike sit in front of El today?

He took a couple of steps out of the classroom. She must have been trying to cheat off of his test.

Mystery solved, he figured. When Mrs. Sanders looked in his direction it must've been for El Hopper.

Aw shit. He thought, halfway to the AV room. He forgot his binder in his desk.

Mike quickly rushed back to the class. A couple steps outside the door, he heard the voice of Mrs. Sanders.

"I'm very disappointed in you for trying to cheat on this test."

"I'm sorry." A new voice said El's voice. "I just didn't know how to do any of the questions..."

Mike frowned. They were pretty easy questions.

"Well, these questions are important for your future in this class." Mrs. Sanders said. "The skills necessary to answer these questions will be essential in passing this class."

El sighed. "I don't know how to answer these questions."

"Well, I'd suggest getting a tutor. Maybe I can partner you with someone who did well on the test and you two could work together to further your understanding."

"A tutor?" She complained.

"No..." Mrs. Sanders said. "A study-buddy. Someone who can help you. I don't know who did well on the test yet, but I have a couple of ideas on who I could partner you with. Learning these concepts is critical, so I'll let you know as soon as possible when I have your partner chosen."

"Alright." She sighed. El stomped her way to the exit.

Mike feels like he shouldn't have overheard that. This is *twice*, that's

he's accidentally eavesdropped on El Hopper and Mrs. Sanders. *In the same hour!*

Her footsteps were getting closer and Mike had to pretend he wasn't just blatantly listening in on her personal conversation with the teacher.

Mike rested his hand on his chin, stroking it like he was a philosopher deep in thought. His other hand grabbed the closest locker door handle, making it seem like he was just a student trying to remember his combination. Genius, right?

Obviously not, since as soon as El exited the room, she was halted in her tracks and looked at him like he was an anomaly she had never seen before. Now that he thinks about it, stroking your chin only ever looked cool on people with a beard.

He probably looked really stupid.

"Nerd..." She muttered as she rolled her eyes and resumed walking past him.

A bit harsh, but he probably deserved it.

He quickly entered the room to grab his binder.

"Sorry, Mrs. Sanders. I forgot my binder." He gestured to the binder in his desk.

"Not a problem, Mike." She replied. "Are you going to continue tutoring this year?" She asked him.

"Yeah, of course." Mike said. "It counts as community service hours."

She nodded thoughtfully, not continuing the conversation. Mike took that as his cue to leave.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

"Guys, she was cheating off of my test." Mike explained to his friends

in their usual lunch spot, the AV room. "And Mrs. Sanders said she needed to get a tutor."

His three other friends were all looking at him.

"So what?" They said.

"She cheated off of you...and got caught." His friend Lucas said. "It's happened to all of us."

"Yeah." Will agreed. "We can all think of like, a million times where people have tried cheating off of us or straight up asked us what answers to the test were. What's the big deal?"

"Uhh," Mike stammered, because what is the big deal?

He didn't know.

"I guess it was just something interesting that happened..." He resigned.

"Well, wait a minute." Dustin said. "This is El Hopper we're talking about."

Mike, Will and Lucas were confused. "So...?"

Dustin sighed, his facial features drooping in a way that said *are you all idiots?*

"El Hopper!" He continued. "Daughter of the chief of police, Jim Hopper? One of the more popular people of Hawkins High?"

The boys still looked confused.

"Oh, come on!" Dustin said. "She's a bonafide badass. Doing whatever she wants, whenever she wants."

"She didn't seem like a badass." Mike commented.

"She is. Trust me."

"Alright then." Will said. "So, Dustin has a crush on El Hopper."

Mike and Lucas laughed.

"No, I don't have a crush on her. But if someone as popular and cool as *her* is hovering around us, maybe that'll make us cooler."

"I wouldn't really call using me as an answer guide *hovering around us*." Mike argued.

"But there's a social system. She is on the upper end of it. We are on the lower end of it."

"Dude, so what?" They said.

Dustin sighed. "Fine, whatever. I don't care anymore. We can just be losers for life."

And that ceased their conversation about El.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

Mike's next class was advanced functions. Yes, another math class.

What can he say? He really liked math. He was good at it.

He shared the class with Dustin and Lucas. They all sat near each other at the front. Their teacher handed out a review package and told the class they could work on it in groups.

Naturally, the three boys were a group.

They hit a couple of roadblocks, Mike and Lucas had conflicting answers. They argued about who was right, asking Dustin to do the problem himself. But he hadn't made it that far yet, instead choosing to let his friends handle their problem themselves.

Although, the way Dustin said it sounded more like, "I don't care about your petty problems, figure it out yourself."

Usually, Will was the person they went to if there was an argument or disagreement in the Party, but Will had opted to take advanced

functions over the summer, giving him a spare during period three.

After they managed to get over that bump, the rest of the package went by fairly easily. Class ended before they could completely finish the package, however. Their teacher told them the review package was homework and the boys agreed to meet after school at Mike's to finish it.

Mike's next and final class of the day was English. Will was in it, too, but their teacher had an assigned seating plan based on the first letters of their last names. And unfortunately, Wheeler was nowhere close to Byers.

El was also in the class, apparently. Mike learned that when she walked in five minutes after the bell. Their teacher muttered something about being fashionably late and how it doesn't work in high school.

This was one of the first times that Mike had ever sat at the back purposely. Usually, he sat at the front, near his friends and near the teacher. He didn't want to miss anything the teacher said, and all of the notes looked so small from back here. Maybe he needed glasses...

He looked enviously at Will, sitting at the front.

English was by far his worst subject. It was the polar opposite of Math, which is what he excelled at.

It's not like he wasn't able to read or write. He could do those perfectly fine, but *ahhhhhh*. He never wanted to.

The only reason Mike does well in Math subjects is because he's passionate about Math. He understands numbers.

Words, on the other hand, were much more confusing. Like why did he even have to read *King Lear*? The Shakespearean language was confusing and annoying. He's positive his friends would agree with him.

Their English teacher moved quick and talked fast. Mike didn't really know him like he knew the other teachers because the teacher was new as of this year.

Mike had already forgotten his name.

At the start of class, he handed out a copy of *King Lear* to each student, in alphabetical order. So anyone with a last name starting with *A* received their book first, then *B*, then *C*, and so on.

Unfortunately for Mike, having the last name Wheeler did no favours for him here. Mike was the only person in class to not get a book.

That is until El showed up late, making them the only *two* to not have a book.

Their teacher, Mr... Mr. uh..., Mr. something-or-other told them he would work on getting them their own copies of the book as soon as possible. For now, he said they can use the teacher's copy of the book and share it. He wanted them to get up to chapter two before the end of class and jot down the names of the characters they're introduced to.

He was sharing a book with El Hopper? That's great. He thought.

His classmates around the room darted their eyes between Mike and El as they heard that they had to share a book. He could literally see them start to whisper.

Mike rolled his eyes. They were probably saying how the nerd was partnering up with her. It's nothing he wasn't used to.

He looked to see what Will's reaction was. Will only shrugged at him, then went back to his book.

El looked back towards him, her face filled with boredom, like she didn't want to be doing this either, although probably for a different reason than Mike. Mike didn't want to work with someone who looked down on him and his friends. El probably didn't want to work in general.

She made no attempt to walk towards him, even though Mike was the one with the book. Their teacher had handed the book to Mike as he stepped out of the classroom, presumably to hunt down another *King Lear* book.

Mike had to admit that El probably had a better location for reading the book. She was secluded, off to one side of the room. There weren't many people around her and there was an open desk beside her that Mike could sit in.

But on principle, Mike didn't budge. People usually expected him to cave into doing whatever they wanted with him. Also, he was still pretty irked about the *nerd* comment that she made earlier. There was nothing weird about stroking a non-existent beard while holding a random locker. Absolutely nothing at all.

He waved the book in a beckoning gesture.

She just shook her head, looked at him, looked at the open desk beside her, then looked back at him. *You. Here. Now.*

Mike loudly sighed. At least three people around looked at him, startled. A couple of others had a *what's wrong with you* look on their face. He just stood up and sulked over to the desk beside El.

"Hello, El Hopper." Mike gloomily said.

She raised her eyebrows at him. "Hello, Mike Wheeler?"

She knew his name?

"You know my name?"

She seemed confused. "Yes, I know your name. We've went to school together for the past three years?"

"Uhh, yes." Mike cleared his throat and took a seat. "Yes, we have."

"Alright then, nerd." She muttered.

Mike scrunched his face at her as if he just ate something sour.

"Chill." She said. "It's just a joke..."

"Right..." Mike said. He plopped the book on the desk.

A joke? It never feels like a joke...

El picked it up and flipped to the first page.

The moment Mike saw the gibberish that was the words he sighed.

"Not a fan?" El asked, not looking at him, focusing on the words.

"What and you are?" Mike asked.

"God no." She replied, placing the book down.

"Mr. something-or-other told us we need to finish chapter one, though. So I guess we better get started on that."

"Hmm." She replied noncommittally. "Wait did you say *Mr. something-or-other*?"

"Well, uh, yeah?" Mike replied, scratching the back of his head. "I couldn't remember his name.'

"I thought you were on a first-name basis with all of the teachers, though." El said, a smile hinting on her face.

Mike's eyebrows shot up. Was she *teasing* him? She joked in a playful way. Usually, people would make a joke like that but have more venom in their words. El didn't seem to be trying to insult him at all.

Mike thought back to what Dustin said. How she's was some uber-cool badass. To Mike, she just seemed like some regular person.

Now that Mike was close to her, he could notice small details about her. Like her whiskey-coloured eyes. Or the dimple on her one cheek when she smiled.

Mike didn't know why whiskey was the first adjective to come to his mind, or why he was noticing her dimples, but it seemed to resonate.

She didn't seem like some bonafide badass. She seemed like El Hopper.

"What's that?" El asked, looking at him.

"What?" Mike said confused.

"You said my name."

Mike frowned.

"You said El Hopper."

Did he say that out loud?

"Uhhh," Mike eloquently said. "No, I didn't?" it was phrased as more of a question. All El did was raise her eyebrows at him.

"Alright then." She said, clearly not believing him.

Mike wondered if he should bring up the cheating incident. Would she get mad? Embarrassed? Did Mike even have a reason to bring it up?

He wasn't given the chance to think about it, since their teacher, who Mike officially dubbed as Mr. something-or-other, walked back into the class.

"I have some good news, and I have some bad news." He told him and El.

"Bad news." El said.

While Mike said, "Good news." At the exact same time.

Mike incredulously looked at her. What kind of person wants the *bad* news first?

She looked back at him and shrugged.

"Alright then..." Their teacher said. "We ordered some new *King Lear* books. You guys will get brand new books while everyone else has the older ones. Except they don't come in until next week. So, you two will need to share that book until then."

Mike looked over at El. Could he really do an entire week of sharing a book? They spent almost an entire period and they haven't even started to read it yet. If they had to share the book for the next week, Mike would be seriously behind once he got his own.

Mr. something-or-other walked back to his desk. To supervise, probably.

"We still need to finish the first chapter, by the way."

El tossed him their book. "Here, keep it. I probably won't even end up reading the book, even if I get my own copy."

Mike blanched. She wouldn't even end up reading it? "So you just won't do any of the chapter work either, then?"

She nodded.

Those are terrible study habits, Mike thought. He could never imagine purposely skipping work.

"Don't seem so shocked." El said to him. His facial expressions must've been really noticeable.

"In case you didn't know, I'm not really known for doing my homework." She continued. "Unlike you, and your friends." She added, almost as an afterthought.

"I heard what Mrs. Sanders said to you." Mike blurted against his better judgement. "About how you tried cheating off of me." Mike leaned in and whispered that part. People around the room were still carefully glancing back at them. He didn't want to embarrass her or anything.

El smiled, seemingly embarrassed. "It's okay. I know I'm not the smartest. I needed help during the test, and you were by far the smartest person around my group of desks. So I figured I'd help myself." She nodded, not really sure what he was expecting from saying it out loud.

"And who has a test on the first day?" El complained.

"Exactly!" Mike said, waving his arm around in agreement.

"It's whatever..." El said, shaking her head. "I had no idea how to do the concepts on the test. Mrs. Sanders is giving me another chance to right myself, but I- It's whatever. I'll figure it out."

"You know," Mike started to say but was cut off by the bell. He sighed. "I guess I'll have to tell you another time."

El stood up and gathered her things. "I guess you will." She confirmed.

She tried to hand him the book, but Mike shook his head. "I think you should keep it. Maybe if you have it, there's a better chance you'll do the homework questions."

He could always borrow Will's copy.

She raised her eyebrows at him. "Maybe I will. Although I probably won't." She joked.

Mike laughed and gathered his things too.

"I'll uh, umm. I guess I'll see you tomorrow then?" He said with an awkward wave.

"See ya tomorrow, nerd." She playfully said.

Mike smiled and made a beeline to Will at the front, almost knocking into two different people. His mind was still buzzing from the way she called him a nerd, but with no malice.

If Mike hated one nickname above all others, it was nerd. Troy had called Mike and his friends that for years. People used it as an insult when all he was doing was being a good student. It made his blood boil. So what if he was smart? Why should that be a reason to hold him down?

He constantly heard it through middle school and high school. Luckily he was in his last year, so he'd be gone soon.

He made it over to Will, who was still putting his books in his bag.

"Are you coming to my house?" Mike asked. "The rest of the guys are."

"Yeah sure." Will says. They started to walk out the door.

Mike awkwardly smiled when he passed El's desk. She gave him a small wave.

Will bumped his shoulder with his. "How was your English class?" He sing-songed.

Mike looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"It seems like you made a new friend."

"What?" Mike asked incredulously. "El? She's just the person I have to share the book with..."

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Back at Mike's basement, the Party was finishing all the homework they received that day.

Mike still needed to finish his advanced functions review package and to actually read the first chapter of *King Lear*.

Dustin and Lucas were arguing over their Biology homework. Mike didn't take biology this year and from the sound of their arguing, he's glad he didn't.

"Will?" Mike asked. "Can you look over my functions work?"

"Yeah, sure." He replied.

"Wait, can you look over mine too?" Lucas asked.

"Me too!" Dustin chimed in, rushing to grab his review package.

Will looked at all of them, then back at Mike, and sighed. "Fine, I'll look over all of your functions homework."

"Thanks, Will. You're the best." They called back to him.

"I should have never taken advanced functions during the summer..." Will muttered, only loud enough for Mike to hear.

Mike laughed, but immediately felt bad. They just handed Will a bunch of extra work to do.

"I can do your English work if you want?" Mike offered. "I'll write down the names of the characters and stuff, and then give you a summary of what happened."

"Thanks, I appreciate that." Will said.

It was settled, then. Since Mike also had to do this work, he might as well do it for himself while he was doing it for Will.

He grabbed his backpack, searching for his book when he remembered he let El have it.

He mentally sighed, why must he be so nice. He gave the book to El in some chivalrous attempt to better her study habits and help her do homework. It's not like he was her tutor.

Although, Mike figured he felt bad for El, already getting admonished on the first day of school. A badass like herself, as Dustin would put it, probably wouldn't want his sympathy.

"Hey Will?" Mike asked.

"Hmm." Will replied. "What's up?"

"I need to borrow your copy of *King Lear* since El has our copy."

That caught Dustin's attention.

"El Hopper has your copy of *King Lear*?" Dustin asked. Lucas has stopped what he was doing and looked up to Mike.

"Well, technically, it's our copy. We share it."

Dustin's mouth dropped open. "So, you've probably talked to El Hopper, then?"

"They *could* sit in silence all class as they read from the same book." Will sarcastically suggested.

"Yes, we've talked." Mike exasperatedly said. "Why is this such a big deal?"

"Because she's popular." Was Dustin's reply.

"She's probably stuck up or something." Lucas said. "Maybe she bullies nerds like us in her spare time. I've seen her hanging out with Troy a couple times."

"I doubt she bullies nerds in her spare time." Mike said. "When I talked to her, she just seemed like a regular person."

"You never know, man."

"So do you think you'll continue talking to her in the near future?" Dustin continued.

"I don't know, probably." Mike said, fed up with these stupid questions.

"Well, I just wanna know if, when you inevitably end up becoming popular, you'll take us with you? Bring us up a couple of steps in the social system."

"We're not gonna instantly become popular if Mike starts dating El Hopper." Lucas said.

"Woah!" Mike said, wide-eyed. "Who said anything about dating? All we're doing is sharing a book, for like the next week."

"I think Lucas was the one who mentioned dating." Will stated.

"Oh, haha. Very funny." Mike sarcastically laughed. "Just gimme your book..." He muttered, swiping Will's copy of King Lear.

"Dustin. You keep saying a social system, but what even is it?" Lucas asked.

"It's kind of like a caste system. Except more school-related. Everyone in the system tries to work their way to the top. Those who are cool are closer to the top. Those who are not, are closer to the bottom."

"That seems superficial and unimportant." Will commented.

"Yes, incredibly so." Dustin agreed. "But if Mike over here is giving us a chance to become cooler, might as well see what it's like."

Mike sighed. "Can we just continue working, please."

The boys all focused back on their work. All thoughts about El Hopper and her whiskey eyes left Mike's mind as he began to work.

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Mike handed Will his copy of *King Lear* back, also handing a copy of the character list to him.

"Why did you make three copies of the character sheets?" Will asked.

Mike frowned. He looked down and saw two copies of the character sheets, plus the one in Will's hand makes three...

"Uhh..." Mike said. He had subconsciously made three copies of the same homework when all he needed was two. "I, uhh, I don't know. I guess I thought I needed three copies? Maybe?"

"Hmm." Will hummed, like he knew something Mike didn't.

"I guess, I'll just throw it out then." Mike concluded.

"Well, wait. We might need it. Keep it for now." Will suggested.

He was definitely scheming, Mike thought. But Mike shook his head. "Fine, I guess. I'll keep it."

"Dinner! Boys, dinner is ready!" Mike's mom called down to the group of boys.

"Finally." Dustin said, dropping his work and rushing upstairs, Lucas quickly following him.

Will waited on the base of the steps for Mike.

Mike looked at the extra copy before quickly stuffing it in his bag and catching up to Will.

So yeah that's chapter one, cool

2. chapter two

Hello, so i'd just like to say that i'm changing upload times from every sunday to every saturday. that is all. thank you.

Words w/out AN: 5315

Pairing(s): Mileven, Lumax

I own nothing.

the social system: chapter two

El didn't know why she cheated off the Wheeler kid.

Actually, she did. She needed answers and she definitely wasn't going to get them from the idiots beside her. So, her only option was from the somewhat competent kid in front of her.

Although that was a *bit* of an understatement. El knew Mike and his friends were by far some of the smartest kids in the school.

El remembered in class Mike looking off somewhere to his right and figured it was the perfect opportunity to not fail the first test of the year (even if it wasn't for any actual marks.)

And seriously, who has a test on the first day back?

Unfortunately for El, she happened to get caught. Not the biggest problem but definitely a problem. Mrs. Sanders gave her a vicious look and El found herself using Mike's floofy hair as a barricade to block out the judgemental staredown.

When class ended, Mrs. Sanders was staring her down like a hawk. El handed in her test and received the dreaded *can you stay after class?*

El figured it would be the usual "You need to try harder." Or "Don't do this again." El thought all she needed to do was say the words the teacher wanted to hear, but when El heard Mrs. Sanders start talking about a *tutor*, she knew she was in deep.

El sighed. She did not want a tutor, or a *study-buddy*, whatever Mrs. Sanders called it. El didn't want to spend an hour or two after school every day doing *more school*. If she spent too much time focused on school her brain would implode, and the janitors probably wouldn't like that.

El left the class and almost ran into the Wheeler kid, Mike. He was doing some weird chin thing while holding the locker in front of him. It confused her so much she stopped in her tracks. For starters, *what was this chin thing he was doing?* It looked so unnatural and forced, El almost laughed.

And who's locker was he holding? She definitely knows it's not his.

Not that she's been keeping tabs on him or where his locker's located, or anything.

But people are given lockers based on alphabetical order of last name. El's locker was nearby, and there was no way *W* was close to *H*. She would've noticed him hanging around here if it was.

They made eye contact and El shook her head, walking past him. "Nerd..." She muttered.

She noticed him frown but she didn't stop to apologize.

El spent the lunch period alone at a table in the cafeteria. She felt the people around her's eyes drifting towards her and staring. Usually, her friend Max would be sitting with her, but she decided to skip the first day of school, leaving El alone, because Max was just *so cool*.

People in school liked to talk.

And for some reason, they found her intimidating. Maybe it was her nonchalant attitude. Or maybe it was the fact that her dad was the chief of police.

Yeah, that one makes more sense.

After an uneventful lunch, El headed to her third-period class, Biology. It was boring. Lame.

And finally, English. By far her easiest subject. There was something about the English language that intrigued her. All the delicacies and intricacies attracted her.

And not to mention El loved reading, although her love became strained when she was forced to do it in class and it was something as confusing as Shakespeare.

She actually liked English, compared to all of the other confusing classes like math, math and more math.

She showed up to class late. Purely accidental but it helped reinforce the *badass* reputation she has, for some reason.

Mr. Jacobs, their English teacher, gave her the lovely news that he didn't have enough *King Lear* books, and she'd have to share. And with Mike of all people.

Not like there was anything wrong with that.

But people in school liked to talk. And she's heard what they've said about Mike and his friends.

Although she didn't personally see anything wrong with liking comic books and nerdy games, not everyone else saw it like that.

Instead of reading, which she usually loves, she could barely even pick up the book. She never liked being forced to do anything, and the language used made her want to throw the book out of the nearest window.

El had spent the entire class talking to Mike, instead. Which was...*nice*.

She thought he was funny. Their conversation flowed well. She immediately noticed he was a lot taller than her. He had freckles splayed across his cheeks and nose and his dark eyes were always warm. He seemed like a nice enough guy

But every now and then she would notice someone in the class looking back at the two of them and she *knew* what they were thinking.

Something along the lines about how she was hanging out with a *nerd*.

El had personally never talked to Mike before, but from this interaction, she knew he was definitely a goody two shoes. Always doing his homework, always listening to the teachers.

They joked about her terrible study habits and Mike even mentioned how he knew she tried to cheat off of him.

He didn't seem angry or anything, which was cool.

He offered to let her keep the book, even though she figured Mike would actually bother to do the homework, so it'd be better if he had it.

That was another thing, El hated about English class, the assigned reading questions.

Mike looked pretty shaken up when El said she probably wouldn't do the homework questions either. She almost laughed at that.

The next morning, El spotted her friend Max's vibrant red hair through the crowd in the hallway. She waiting at her locker for El.

"Maxine. Nice to see you on this beautiful morning." El beamed to her friend.

"Why the hell did you just call me Maxine? Why are you so happy? What the hell did I miss yesterday?" Max interrogated.

"Jeez, relax." El said. "I just missed my best friend."

Max glared at her in disbelief, but it was the truth.

"But yesterday was a pretty *interesting* day." El went on to say. "I'm already failing one of my classes, and it's only the second day."

"How'd you mess up that bad?" Max asked.

"We were given a test to complete-

"On the first day?"

El nodded. "Yeah. And I didn't know how to do some of the questions, so I casually glanced off of the guy in front of me, Mike Wheeler's test. And I got caught."

Max laughed. "I guess you weren't that casual, then, huh."

El glared at her best friend, but she couldn't hold it, laughing after a moment.

"What about you? Huh?" El asked. "What'd you do yesterday that was *so important* that you had to miss the first day of school?"

"Nothing." Max said. "I just felt like it."

"Wow, you're so cool." El fake admired.

"What can I say? I *truly* am inspiring."

El laughed and they started walking to their first-period class.

"So anything else happen after that?" Max asked. "Like for the rest of the day."

"Uhh, not much happened in gym, but in English, we ran out of copies of the book we're reading, *King Lear*. So, I have to share a book with Mike."

"The same guy you cheated off?"

"Yeah."

"Was it awkward?"

"Not really. He brought it up, but he didn't seem to care."

"Is he as big of a nerd as everyone says?" Max pondered.

"Oh yeah. For sure." El confirmed. "But he's actually pretty cool..."

"*Pretty cool?*" Max mimicked. "It seems pretty weird that you try and cheat off of him, and now you're partners. You're basically married."

El blushed. "We aren't partners or anything. We just need to share some stupid book for the next week. But yeah, ever since I tried cheating off of him, I've seen him, like, a million times more than usual."

"I don't know, El..." Max teased. "Book partners one day, partners in life the next."

"Shut up." El laughed, controlling the redness in her cheeks. "C'mon, we have class. I'm pretty sure there was homework in it."

"Oh wow. You wouldn't happen to have an extra copy of that to share with your best friend?" Max asked, batting her eyelashes.

"Haha. That's assuming I have a copy of my own." El said. "Which I don't."

They entered class. "You're lucky I thought ahead to save you a seat." El said. "You could have been sitting next to some random person right now."

Max bowed to El. "Wow. I am so grateful."

They took their seats at the back of the class. They were actually fairly early to class. They were able to see everyone else file in.

El saw Troy and his friends. They weren't exactly being *friendly* with a kid named Dustin.

"Out of the way, Toothless!" Troy said, shoving Dustin out of the doorframe so he and his friends could get by.

Troy walked down to his desk.

El watched as Dustin's friends rushed to him. Lucas seemed to ask if Dustin was okay. Mike was there too, actually. He wasn't in their class but he was walking...wait was he looking at her?

Mike gave a small, awkward wave. El smiled back at him and watched as a blush grew on his face.

"What are you doing?" Max asked. "Checking out the nerds?"

"Oh, haha. Yes. Yes, I am." El deadpanned. "The one with the blush staring at me is Mike."

"Aw, he's so cute." Max adored. "Like a deer caught in headlights."

"Hmm." El hummed.

"Or a lost puppy." Max said.

El burst out laughing.

Mike frowned and tilted his head, furthering the lost puppy look.

"Aww."

The final bell rang and El and Max watched as he scuttled off to his class.

"Who were those kids, Mike was with? The ones sitting in the front row?" Max noncommittally asked, trying to remain casual.

El saw right through it. If there's one thing El knew about her friend Max, was that she simply didn't care about *anything*. Some kid could stand up in the middle of class and scream, and Max would not care.

"Why do you care?" El questioned. "You don't care about stuff like that." It came out as more of a statement than a question.

"That's not true." Max weakly defended. "I care about important things. Like you, my best friend who happens to know the names of the people sitting at the front."

"The one on the left is Dustin. The other is Lucas."

"Interesting..." Max suspiciously said.

"What's so interesting?" El interrogated. "Do you have a crush on them or something?"

Max turned to El wide-eyed. "If you wanna talk about crushes, go over to Mike. He's practically drooling over you."

"Quit being ridiculous." El said, crossing her arms. She was glad

nobody was nearby that could listen to their conversation. "We don't even know each other."

"Maybe he was just staring at us because we're just *that* awesome." El said in a fake posh voice.

They both burst out laughing, apparently too loud, since Dustin and Lucas spun around to glare at them.

Their laughing stopped.

The four of them held eye contact to the point where El was getting weirded out, but didn't want to back down at the same time. She switched between staring at Dustin and Lucas, choosing to focus on Dustin since Max seemed to have Lucas on lock.

Dustin leaned closer to Lucas, maintaining eye contact, and started whispering.

"They're whispering." Max said.

"Should we start whispering, too?" El asked.

"I think we should."

The two girls leaned closer to each other, El even put up her hand to cover her mouth so they couldn't read her lips, all the while maintaining eye contact.

"What do you think they're whispering about?"

"I have no idea."

At the same time, Dustin and Lucas slowly turned back to face the front of the class.

"What the hell just happened?" Max stated. "That was weird."

"Yes. Yes it was." El agreed. She turned to look at Max when she was sure Dustin and Lucas weren't looking at them.

"Why are you blushing?" She innocently asked.

"Shut up."

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

The bell to signal the end of class rang.

El and Max gave Dustin and Lucas a wide berth as they exited the class. The two needed to go to their lockers to pick up their books for their next class.

With all of her binders and the textbooks she gets from each class, El's backpack was weighing her down. She opted, instead, to keep as many books in her locker, and as far away from her, as possible. It keeps all the stress away, she told herself.

They grab the stuff they need, while simultaneously unloading all of their biology stuff, and head to calculus.

They were *almost* late. Well, technically they *were* late, but Mrs. Sanders was late too. So if anything they were just on time.

A couple of people stared at them as they entered, which isn't something they weren't used to.

She noticed Mike was already in his seat, except he wasn't looking at them. He was actively looking anywhere *but* them. Right now he had a pretty solid view of his barren desk.

El and Max walked to their seats behind him. "Hello, Michael." She said as she walked by.

His head whipped up to frown at her. He didn't say anything until she was seated.

"Only my mom calls me Michael..." He muttered.

"Okay." She acknowledged, turning to give her resident best friend her attention.

Max was already looking at her however. Her head was tilted down,

eyebrows raised in shock.

She was giving her a *look*.

Probably a *why did you just go out of your way to talk to the Wheeler kid* look.

El shook her head. "Don't worry about it."

Mrs. Sanders walked into the class, heading to her desk. "Hello everyone, sorry I'm late."

She placed the books in her hand on her desk and stood up, prepared to teach the class. She started talking about factoring and El's brain started to shutdown.

Almost 40 minutes have gone by now, and El was just too confused. She tried paying attention, really, she did.

It was only the second day of class, so Mrs. Sanders was still going over review from last year. El couldn't follow any of what she was saying. That paired with the fact that Mrs. Sanders had been talking for almost 45 minutes made it easier and easier for El to tune her out and focus on random things around her.

El looked over to Max, who seemed to be an ever studious scholar, raptly paying attention, but El knew the facade. Max could be staring intently at the board but all information could be going through one ear and out the other. She was probably thinking about skateboarding or something. El wondered if she could capture her friend's attention, but decided against it. What kind of friend would she be if she were to distract her friend from the wonderful knowledge Mrs. Sanders' face hole was spewing.

El chuckled at herself for calling a mouth a *face hole*.

It seemed like Mrs. Sanders has finished teaching her lesson. "I finished marking everyone's diagnostic tests this morning. Some of you did amazing."

Mrs. Sanders seemed to be pointedly looking in Mike's direction when she said that.

"And some of you have a lot to improve on." Mrs. Sanders continued.

Mrs. Sanders turned her fond look for Mike into a stern glare in her own direction.

The bell rang and Mrs. Sanders called out before everyone left. "Don't forget to do the factoring review page in your textbook. Page 23!"

El stood up to walk over to Max.

"And El, Mike. Can I see you after class?" Mrs. Sanders said after.

El's eyes widened and Max turned to look at her. Max raised her eyebrows at her, asking her a silent question. *What the hell is going on?*

El didn't know for sure. But she had a sneaking suspicion it was slightly related to her *incident* last class. Mrs. Sanders said she wouldn't call her dad and tell him about it if she put in effort towards actually improving.

El slowly turned to look at Mike, who had been switching from glancing at El to glancing at Mrs. Sanders.

They walked to the front of the class together, trying to squeeze through the aisles of desks side by side.

El turned back to look at Max.

"I'll wait for you outside of class." Max said.

"Alright."

Max headed outside to wait for El.

Once the class was empty, Mrs. Sanders said. "Mike. You had the highest score on the diagnostic test. You got perfect on it."

"Oh, uhh, thanks?" Mike pulled at the collar of his sweater.

He looked so uncomfortable with the praise.

"And El, you got the worst score on it."

Mike frowned at Mrs. Sanders. El had to admit, it was pretty tact of her to expose how poorly she did on the test. "Oh, jeez. Thank you." El sarcastically said. "No need to flatter me."

"I don't say this to embarrass you, or to make you feel inferior." Mrs. Sanders explained. "But so everyone here knows all of the facts. Remember how I told you I was going to find you a tutor?"

El nodded.

"Well, if Mike agrees, then he can start tutoring you." Mrs. Sanders said.

"Oh wow." Mike said, scratching the back of his neck. "I don't feel like I'm put on the spot at all."

El laughed and Mike looked at her. He didn't say anything but he seemed to ask her a question. *Is this, do you want to?*

She could even see the stutter in the question. El laughed again at that.

Mike seemed to take that as an answer. "Uh, yeah. I could tutor her. If she wants, of course."

"I could do that." El nodded, looking at Mike.

"Perfect. I know it seems like I forced you both into this situation, but know, I think it will be the best for both of you. As you know, Mike, this counts as community service hours, but depending on how good of a job you do, I can boost your marks accordingly." Mrs. Sanders said. "I need to go now, but enjoy your lunch. I'm sure you two can figure out a schedule that works for both of you."

Mrs. Sanders walked out, leaving just Mike and El.

"Well, that was interesting." El finally said, after they couldn't hear the clicking of Mrs. Sanders heels down the hallway.

"I guess I'm your tutor now?" Mike said, although it seemed like more of a question.

El looked to the door, where she saw Max has poked her head through the doorway.

"What was that about?" Max asked out loud as she strolled into the class.

"Mike here, has so *generously* offered to tutor me in this class. Since I'm currently failing and it's only the second day." El explained.

"If by *offering* you meant forced, that is exactly what happened." Mike quipped.

"Do you not want to tutor me?" El turned to him, slightly disappointed. She doubted anyone else in class could actually help her. "Because you don't have to. We can tell Mrs. Sanders our schedules conflict or something."

"What, no? I can tutor you. I don't mind or anything." Mike rushed to say, waving his arms and shaking his head.

Max raised her eyebrows. She looked over at El.

El just shook her head, ignoring Max. She wasn't going to assume anything based on Mike's *eagerness*. Maybe he just needed the volunteer hours.

"And my schedule is pretty open all the time. Except after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I have AV club. And sometimes on weekends, I play Dungeons and Dragons with my friends." Mike said, his face progressively getting redder and redder, developing a blush. "Well, that probably sounded *kinda* lame-"

"Cool?" El interrupted, trying to make it less embarrassing for him. She nodded her head. "That does sound pretty cool."

Max nodded her head. "Yep. *Extremely* cool."

El rolled her eyes and shot a glare at Max. Her voice was obviously dripping with sarcasm. It probably wouldn't help her to make fun of the guy tutoring her.

"Alright then..." Mike said, taking a couple steps towards the hallway,

outside the classroom.

El kept pace and Max scrambled to follow.

"I'm supposed to be in the AV room for lunch with my friends. They're probably wondering where I am." Mike continued.

"You can go meet them." El suggested.

"Well, we'll need to setup some times where we're both available so we can start the tutoring." Mike said. "Are you guys free right now?"

"We were just gonna go to lunch." Max said, pointing in the general direction of the cafeteria.

"If you want, we could try and figure out a schedule during lunch? I'm sure my friends won't miss me."

El looked at Max, silently asking if it was cool that Mike had lunch with them. El didn't have a problem with it, but maybe Max didn't want Mike at their lunch table or something.

"I don't know..." Max said. "I'm not sure if I wanna be seen in public with a Nerd."

Now, El *knew* Max was joking. This was just how she was, this was just how she joked. But the way she could see Mike's heart tear into tiny pieces was quite literally *heartbreaking*. His eyebrows drooped and a small frown appeared on his face as he avoided eye contact. He had physically recoiled like he had been hit.

"Yeah, that's understandable." Mike mumbled.

And the fact that he called it *understandable*? El glared at her best friend. *What the hell?*

It was just a joke? She shrugged back.

El waved her arms at Mike. *Fix it.*

"Hey, look." Max said, grabbing his shoulder. "I totally didn't mean that in any hurtful way. It was just a joke. I don't actually care if I'm

seen with you. You seem like a pretty cool dude." She tried to amend.

Mike looked up at her, hopeful. "Uhh, don't worry about it. I'm fine. Thank you."

He stopped at an intersection in the hallway. Mike looked to the left and to the right. "Over there," He nodded his head to the left hallway. "That's where my friends probably are."

"In the AV room?" El asked.

"Yeah." Mike said. "I'm sure they'll be fine without me for a day. If you still want to figure out a schedule for tutoring." He looked at her.

El smiled. "Yeah, sure. Let's go to the cafeteria."

The three took the hallway on the right, heading to her usual lunch table.

They walked the short distance to the cafeteria in silence. Mike took a seat first, with El choosing to sit beside him and Max sitting across from the both of them.

Mike looked around the cafeteria. He seemed to be scanning it.

Throughout El's three years of eating lunch in the cafeteria, she doesn't think she has ever seen Mike or his friends eat here.

"Have you ever eaten here before?" She asked him.

"Once." He replied, eyes still scanning. "My first day of my first year. Me and the guys sat down at one of the lunch tables to have...*lunch*."

"You had lunch here *once...*" Max said. "And never did it again?"

"Halfway through, Troy and his friends walked up to us. He dumped a half-full carton of chocolate milk on my friend, Will."

"That's terrible." El gasped.

"What a dick." Max muttered.

"After that, we discovered AV Club, which was a saf- better way of

eating our lunch."

El noticed he was going to say *safer*. "I saw Troy in Biology class. He was picking on Dustin."

"Yeah." Mike said. "I saw you guys there." He looked down and El noticed his neck was starting to turn red.

"Troy usually goes out for lunch nowadays." Max commented. "I don't even think he's here right now."

"Oh." Mike said, his eyes stopped darting around the room. He turned to look at them. "That's cool, I guess."

Mike was anxiously bouncing his knee. She could slightly feel his leg against hers.

El nodded and tried to pull out her lunch. It was underneath the few books she kept in her bag. She took the books out, placing them on their table, before finally getting her lunch.

Mike looked at the pile she had made. He nodded down to it. "Did you end up reading that?"

She looked at the *King Lear* book on the top of the pile. "What do you think?"

"I'll take that as a no, then."

"I think Mr. Jacobs is doing a homework check, too. Seeing if we wrote down the names of all the characters that showed up in the first scene. Which is a shame, since I didn't do that."

"Mr. *who*?" Mike asked.

"Mr. Jacobs. Our english teacher."

"Oh...You mean Mr. something-or-other. I think I prefer Mr. something-or-other over Mr. Jacobs."

El rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Be delusional then."

"I actually made an *extra copy* of the homework. I was working on it with Will. He was busy doing something for me, so I decided to be nice and make an extra copy of the homework for him. But for some reason, I made three copies, instead of two." He waved around the extra copy.

"Well, what a coincidence. Since *I* happen to not have a copy of the homework." El said. "If you could be so nice and give that to me, that'd be great." She batted her eyebrows.

"Ha. Nice try. Maybe I'll just keep it for myself. I could get a nice frame..."

"You know what I think?" El asked. "I think you purposely made an extra copy to give to me, since you *knew* I wouldn't do the homework."

Mike blushed. "Oh please." He stuttered out. "It was just some coincidence. A mistake."

El patted him on the arm. "If it was just a mistake, then you shouldn't mind just giving it to me."

Mike laughed. "Fine. It's not like I have any use for it, anyway. Just don't expect me to be the kind of tutor that does *all* of your homework for you. That would seriously suck."

"Oh yeah. I'm sure it would." El teased. "Since you're such a busy person, I wouldn't want to interrupt Dungeons and Dragons or anything."

"Oh, wow. Very funny." Mike said leaning closer to her. "Maybe I'll just take this back then." He grabbed the extra copy of the English homework.

Max had been watching their exchange like El and Mike were characters on the soap operas that El liked to watch at home. Max's eyes were wide and she was just slowly taking bites from her food.

Mike looked down to take another bite of his food and when he wasn't looking, Max winked at El.

El rolled her eyes, shaking her head. *Oh, shut up*, she mouthed.

"Don't worry. I'll kindly take that extra copy of the..." El stopped talking when a group of boys surrounded their table.

"Why'd you stop talking..." Mike said, looking up before making eye contact with Dustin, Lucas and Will.

"What the hell?" Dustin said. "What. The. Hell?"

"Umm." Mike started to say.

"What the *hell*?" Dustin interrupted. "What. The. *Hell*?"

"I think that's-"

"What the hell, Michael." Dustin exasperatedly said.

"He just called you Michael..." El muttered to Mike.

Mike laughed but he tried to stifle it. Dustin seemed serious. He eyed them both down, looking slightly intimidating. He pointed at both of them and slid his thumb across his neck, like a knife.

Mike gulped.

"We have been eating lunch in the AV room for the past twenty minutes. Where have you been? Eating lunch with some girls?" Dustin said. "We have stuff to do."

"Look." Mike said. "I'm sorry, guys. But Mrs. Sanders-"

"Listen, Michael." Dustin interrupted. "We care about you, really, we do. And we aren't mad. Just disappointed. Some people here are acting a bit irrational. So when we *all* have calmed down," Dustin gave a pointed look to Mike, like he was the one being irrational, "You'll know where to find us. Come on, guys."

Dustin started to walk away, presumably headed back to the AV room. Dustin had made such a kerfuffle that a couple nearby tables were looking at them strangely. El wanted to laugh at *whatever it is that just happened* but there was an eerie silence, filled by only

Dustin's footsteps.

Max was having some sort of staring contest with Mike's friend, Lucas. Except Max seemed slightly confused, her head tilted. While Lucas had some dreamy expression on his face.

Mike was staring at Dustin's retreating figure, his mouth open in shock.

While Mike's other friend, Will, just stood around.

"Well, this went about as well as I thought it would." Will said, breaking the silence. "It was nice meeting you guys. And Mike, if you could stop by the AV room before lunch ends, that'd be great. Thanks."

Will pulled Lucas away, promptly ending his staring contest? The two left the cafeteria.

"Alright then." Mike said, stuffing the rest of the sandwich in his mouth. "That was *interesting*."

"Yeah, you could say that." Max said. "Who's your friend, Wheeler?"

"The one you were making goo-goo eyes with?" Mike asked.

El bursted out laughing, while Max just glared at him.

"I'm not gonna answer that." She said, crossing her arms.

"Lucas. Lucas Sinclair. He's super cool. I could introduce you two?" Mike said. He started packing up his binders into his bag. "I guess I gotta go talk to them about that *scene*, huh? Sorry about that, by the way. Dustin is just...acting weird, right now."

"Do you want your copy of the English homework back?" El asked, reaching it out to him.

He waved her off her off and smiled. "Don't worry about it."

He said his goodbyes and started to walk away, but El shouted: "Wait." Delaying his departure even more.

She stood up and half-jogged over to him. He turned around and took a few steps closer to her, to meet her in the middle.

El miscalculated the stopping distance and almost ploughed him down, taking them both out. But Mike steadied them, grabbing her arm and pulling her closer to him.

They were *pretty* close together, but she didn't move away. Instead of remaining where she was, frozen, like a deer caught in headlights. Mike was still holding her, making sure she was alright. She could clearly see his dark eyes and freckles spread across his cheeks.

"Are you alright?" Mike asked, his voice was low, so only she could hear.

El's face grew red. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "I'm fine."

Mike let go of her arm and a warmth coming from where his hand was she didn't realize existed stopped spreading. They didn't move apart.

"What is it you wanted to tell me?" Mike asked.

"We didn't schedule a time for you to help me study."

"I guess we'll have to meet up and figure it out later then." He said, before stepping away, leaving the cafeteria.

The blush on El's face started to recede. A couple people in the cafeteria were staring at *what just happened*, but she rolled her eyes at them. El doesn't care what those people think.

But...

What just happened?

Hello all, 'tis I, with the second instalment of *this*. Hopefully you all are enjoying so far. not really much to say now, although i'm still working on this, none of it is prewritten. which is a shame since now there's a looming pressure on myself to consistently

work on this and get it finished (which is a good thing lol) anyway. hopefully you all enjoyed, and all mistakes are mine (although i'm actually putting in the effort to edit this, since I want my first "multi-chap" fic to be well done. if you see any mistakes, let me know, whether its continuity, spelling, grammar, or whatever. also please review, i'd love to hear feedback. i try to reply to all reviews but i haven't replied to any on my last three fics because i'm super lazy)

3. chapter three

if you want to, you can check out my other stuff, thanks :)

Words w/out AN: 6156

Pairing(s): Mileven, Lumax

I own nothing.

the social system: chapter three

Mike was convinced his friends were idiots.

He couldn't believe they had barged into the cafeteria and scolded him like they were his mother in front of El... And Max.

It was embarrassing.

Although it was mainly Dustin, but, *ahhhh*, don't even get Mike started on Dustin.

Dustin was practically praising El and Max for being *so cool* earlier. But then he goes and does some super *uncool* stuff in front of them, treating them as if they were public enemy number one.

Mike was so rattled, he couldn't think of a better word to describe it. It was just so...*uncool*.

Mike thought he would be able to spend *one* lunch period without his friends, but apparently, he was wrong.

Luckily El and Max didn't seem to mind his friends too much. They were actually pretty cool people.

And after a rocky start with Max, it had definitely lightened up closer to the end of the lunch period. They were all able to joke around without too many problems.

They were having such a good time that Mike forgot the whole

reason he was in the cafeteria was to set up a schedule to help tutor El.

Which was something El decided to come *tumbling* into him to remind Mike of.

Don't even ask Mike what kind of *moment* happened between him and El as he was leaving, though. Because he would not be able to put it into words.

She had tripped, and somehow he managed to catch her, instead of them both toppling over. Mike noticed how their faces were really close, and their bodies were really close, and they were just *really close*, in general.

He remembered his breath hitching and a blush on El's face before she said. "We didn't schedule a time for you to help me study."

"I guess we'll have to meet up and figure it out later then." He had brazenly said, somehow avoiding stuttering like a moron before stepping away to yell at his idiot best friends.

Mike heard his footsteps echoing through the halls as he stomped towards the AV room. His face must've been intimidating or something because some of the younger students walking through the hall immediately got out of his way.

He made it to the AV room and opened the door. The guys were crowded around the table in the centre of the room. Although calling it a *room* was generous. If anything it was a storage closet. Shelves were filled all around the walls with boxes filled to the brim with old electronics and wires.

Dustin, Lucas and Will were animatedly arguing, arms were waving all over the place. When they noticed Mike had entered, their conversation stopped.

All three of them stared at Mike as he sat in his usual seat.

"Well?" Dustin said, breaking the silence.

"Well, what?" Mike asked. "Just *yesterday* you were saying that El is

so cool. I spend one lunch with her and all of a sudden she's the devil?"

"I specifically remember mentioning you *bringing us with you* when you become popular." Dustin said. "Not ditch us for your cool new friends."

"It was *one* lunch, not even. It was like, *half* a lunch." Mike countered. "I didn't *become cool* or anything like that. I just had to set up a time and place for me and El to meet up. I'm tutoring her."

"You're tutoring her?" Will asked.

"Yeah. Mrs. Sanders asked me to at the end of class last period."

The group was silent. No one said anything. Mike felt pretty strongly that Dustin was in the wrong, but he could understand where he was coming from.

"I'm not ditching you guys." Mike said, watching as Dustin's hard face softened. "I'd never leave the party."

Dustin sighed. "I'm sorry, okay? I overreacted."

"In our defense," Lucas cut in. "We told him not to do anything stupid."

Will nodded in agreement. "He told us he just wanted to *talk*."

"Jeez, thanks, guys." Dustin said. "No need to expose me like that."

"It's whatever. No need to think about stuff that already happened." Mike said. "Tell me about this project we have?"

Mike looked at Dustin. They locked eyes and Mike nodded, just a bit. Enough for Dustin to know that he was forgiven.

Mike knew his friends made mistakes and overreacted sometimes. But they've been through thick and thin. And nothing could ever split them up.

"Screw the project." Dustin said. "Tell us about El and Max."

Lucas' head whipped in their direction when he heard the word *Max*. "Yes, Mike. Tell us about...*them*."

"You mean tell me about *Max*." Will muttered.

"Yeah, you weren't subtle during our staring contest at the start of bio." Dustin said. "And again when we went to the cafeteria."

"Shut up." Lucas said. "I don't have a crush."

"Well, technically, we didn't say anything about a crush." Mike pointed out.

Lucas groaned.

"They were actually pretty cool, though." Mike said. "They're really funny and they joke a lot."

Dustin nodded, motioning for him to continue.

"Max, for example, insults you."

"That sounds terrible."

"It was, at first, but once you realize it's just a joke and she doesn't actually mean it, it's better. You can insult her back and she'll understand it's just a joke and nothing more."

"What about El?"

"Uhh," Mike stuttered. How would he describe El?

Funny, kind, pretty...*pretty*?

Yes. Pretty.

Lucas' frowned at him and Will's eyes were wide. Dustin was just shaking his head and smiling.

Mike's jaw dropped. "Umm, did I just...?"

"Yes." They replied.

"Umm, okay then." Mike said. "She's also really funny and kind." He offered weakly.

"Yeah." Dustin nodded sarcastically. "I'm sure she is."

"So when are you *tutoring* her?" Lucas asked, putting emphasis on the *tutoring* part.

"It doesn't interfere with AV Club, right?" Will piped in.

"We actually haven't set a time yet." Mike admitted.

"What so you had lunch with them and didn't even get any work done?"

"Well, I tried." Mike defended. "But we got interrupted. I'll have to meet up with her again to figure it out."

"Oh, I'm sure you'd like that."

"Yeah, maybe the next time they meet up, they'll get too busy lost in each other's eyes or something, so they'll have to meet up *again*."

"Shut up." Mike crossed his arms. "Let's just work on this project or whatever."

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

It turned out the project was really interesting.

Mike, Dustin and Lucas talked about it in hushed tones during their functions class.

Apparently, the club was tasked with making a video project for the school that showcased all of the staff and faculty members. The video was going to be used as a sort of introduction. Students could watch the video to learn about all the teachers and stuff.

Okay so the video wasn't *that* interesting, most of the footage was already filmed and anything else they needed was going to be

provided, but they promised Mr. Clarke that they would do it, so they were determined to do a good job on it.

Once their teacher realized they weren't talking about math-related stuff, he quickly put an end to their chatter. Which kind of put a damper on their progress, but no matter. They'd be able to talk more about it during AV Club after school today.

Class wasn't too memorable when the thoughts of the video project were filling Mike's head. Although Mike remembered their teacher going over the review packages that were handed out yesterday. Mike got perfect on it because of Will.

"Alright class." Their teacher called out. "We've still got review to look over for the next couple days or so. So the plan for the next few days is pretty much going to be the same as what we did yesterday. I'll hand out a review package, which needs to be completed for the next day. Then we'll go over the previous day's work and I can answer any questions you have. But once next week starts, I'll be teaching you completely new stuff. So the days might start to look different."

Mike was excited at the idea of learning new material. The review they were going over now was fairly simple. He wanted something that would challenge him.

Their teacher handed out today's review and he instantly got to work, trying to compete with Dustin and Lucas to see who could finish it the fastest.

Mike knew they probably weren't going to be able to finish the package by the end of this period, but they still tried.

"We're meeting up after AV Club at my house to finish this, right?" Mike asked.

"I think Will said we could go to his house after school. His mom was going to order a pizza or something."

"Nice."

"So, Michael..." Dustin casually said.

Mike looked over to Dustin, eyes wide. "Whatever you're about to say next. Don't say it. I don't like the way your voice sounds."

"Well, thanks Mike." Dustin complained. "That's just the way my voice is. I don't like the way your *face* looks."

"I'm just saying you sound like you're up to something."

"Well, I'm up to nothing." Dustin pointedly said. "Also, are you dating El?"

Mike blanched and Lucas whipped his head towards Dustin. Luckily no one else seemed to hear, but Mike didn't want word to get around or anything. If he was drinking something, Mike probably would have spit it out everywhere.

"Say that any louder, why don't you?"

"Well? Are you?" Dustin questioned.

"No! Obviously *not*." Mike exclaimed. "We've talked like four times, total."

"Okay." Dustin held his arms up in surrender. "Relax."

"Wow." Mike shook his head.

By the end of class Mike was surprised how far he made it through the review package. Even with Dustin's perplexing *outburst*.

The bell rang and Mike packed up his stuff. "Alright, see you guys after school."

They nodded and they all made their way to their next class. Mike was pretty sure they were headed to Chemistry, while he headed to English.

Mike walked into class and looked to his seat. He was surprised to see El in class on time. She wasn't sitting specifically in *his* seat, but the seat next to his.

Mike walked over to his desk. "Don't you sit over there?" He pointed

over to the group of desks they sat in yesterday.

"I did." She nodded. "Now I'm sitting here."

"You are?" Mike asked, his voice squeaked a bit. "Doesn't Mr. uh, Mr. Jacobs have assigned seats?"

"You remembered his name!" El sarcastically clapped. "Congrats."

"And yes. He does." She continued on. "But what other option do we have?" El smiled and waved their book around.

"Alright then." Mike nodded. "Cool cool cool."

Mike took a seat beside El, nervously drumming his fingers on the desk.

"Soooo..." He started. "Are you gonna be sitting here for, like..." He trailed off, unsure of what to say.

"I will be sitting here." She nodded like that was the answer to his question. "We are *friends*, right? I figured you wouldn't mind."

"Friends? Yeah, we're friends." Mike nodded. "Friends. That's us." He babbled on.

They were friends, now. Officially friends. Mike looked around, a couple of people had noticed El's new seat, but since they were at the back of the class not *that* many people knew of what was occurring.

"Assuming nothing weird happens between us, like you killing my cat or something, then I was thinking I could just sit here for the rest of the semester." El casually said.

Mike laughed. "I'll try to avoid your cat, then."

El laughed too, before getting more serious. "And it's not like I had many friends sitting over there." She nodded her head towards her old seat.

"Well, Will was pretty close to your old desk. He's pretty cool."

"Yeah, but I feel like I know you more." She countered.

Mike nodded in agreement, feeling like El knew him better than she knew Will.

"Wait. Didn't someone else sit there?" He motioned to the desk she was sitting in.

"Yeah, but I asked them to move, *politely* of course."

The way she said *politely* gave Mike the impression that she threatened them. Although El doesn't give him the impression of a threatening person.

"Did you threaten their cats?" Mike jokingly asked. "I feel like that would work."

El laughed and Mike found himself savouring the moment.

In a totally *non-creepy*, casual way, of course.

But the sound of her laugh was so contagious. He instinctively smiled when he heard her laugh. It made Mike want to make her smile as much as possible.

"I, uh, I like your smile." He quietly blurted out, unsure if that would be one of those *weird* things that would make her want to swap desks. "It's nice."

El slowly looked at him, a grin spread across her face. Mike noticed the hints of a blush rising up her neck.

"Thank you." She said. "You keep making funny jokes and I guess it'll make me smile more."

They both looked forward, ready to start the class.

Mike glanced over and blushed.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

"Are you done reading the page yet?" El asked, presumably bored out of her mind.

Mike and El decided to try and make actual progress in their book.

It turned out having two people read one book was a terrible way to read books. One person would inevitably be *the fast reader*, meaning they would have to wait for the slow reader to catch up.

And as it turned out, *Mike*, was the slow reader.

He groaned and slammed his head onto the desk. "This is impossible." He said, face squished against the desk.

El slapped his shoulder. "It's not impossible, it's just reading."

"How are you already done reading the *entire* page, while I'm still on like, the first paragraph."

"Well, I thought the book would be pretty boring, but it's actually getting really interesting."

Mike groaned again.

"I'm sorry. I'm going to need you all to stop reading for a moment." Mr. Jacobs called out. "I just want to do a quick homework check. Just put your homework on your desk and while you're reading I'll come by and check it out."

El placed the book down and grabbed the sheet Mike made her from her bag.

"Wow, did you really do the homework?" He incredulously asked while grabbing his own copy.

"Why yes. I did. I did all of the homework *all on my own*." El sarcastically said.

"Wow. You *must* be such a hardworking student."

"I am. I really am." She nodded in agreement.

Mike placed his copy of the homework beside El's on her desk. He saw her look down at his handwriting, comparing it between the two copies. They were pretty similar, but Mike figured they were different enough that they wouldn't be called out for cheating.

Mike took his time to straighten the pieces of paper beside each other when El rested her hand on top of his. He froze, gazing at their hands, wondering why she spontaneously wanted to *hold hands*.

She gave his hand a quick squeeze.

His gaze flitted up to her eyes.

"Thank you," She whispered. "For the extra copy."

Now Mike could feel a blush rising on his neck, hoping it wouldn't make its way to his cheeks. "Yeah. Anytime."

Mr. Jacobs walked by and examined their papers. "Good work you two."

He gave them a small nod before heading to the next person to check their homework.

"So..." El said. "Did you finish that page yet?"

Mike groaned.

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"Are *you* done the page yet?" Mike asked smugly after finishing the page.

"Yes! I've been done for the past three minutes."

"Shit. I thought I finished before you." Mike muttered.

"I've been finishing every page before you for the past two chapters. Why would *this* be the page where you finish before me?"

"Wait, it's been *two* chapters?" Mike asked. "We couldn't even finish *one* page yesterday."

"I know, it's kind of weird how much progress we made."

"Hmm. I guess we make a good team then."

El smiled. "That gives me hope for our tutoring sessions, then."

"Yeah." Mike laughed. "We still need to figure when to do that."

"You have AV Club after school today, right?"

"Uh, yeah. I do. And after school I think I'm going to Will's."

She nodded. "I think I'm busy tonight, too, but maybe after school tomorrow, then?"

"That might work." Mike agreed. "We could meet in the library after school? Usually whenever me and my friends do stuff, it's at my house." Mike casually said.

"Oh," El gasped. Her eyes widened. "So... you're inviting me to your house?"

"Uhh...I mean. I was just saying...That's what my friends usually..." Mike stuttered out. "I wasn't trying to..."

Mike's face grew red. He was probably digging himself deeper in this hole. He didn't mean to *invite her to his house* or anything...scandalous like that. It was just something that came to his mind.

"Chill, dude. You're becoming redder with every word you say." El said. "I'm just going to *assume* you didn't mean it like *that*."

"Yes, good, good." Mike cleared his throat. "It's just, like I said earlier, usually my friends come over to my house to do work and hang out and stuff."

"Well, after all, we are *such* good friends." El agreed, nodding along. "But maybe for a *tutoring session*, we should stick with the library."

"Yeah." Mike nodded. "That's a great idea, too. So, library after school tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I guess I'll see you there."

Mike looked around and only realized class was over when Will walked over to him and El.

"So you guys had a productive class."

"Yeah, we, uh, finished two chapters of the book." Mike brandished their copy of *King Lear*.

"You're coming over to my house after AV Club, right?" Will asked, looking at Mike.

"Yeah, Lucas and Dustin told me about it."

"I thought all of Mike's friends usually went to *Mike's* house after school." El said, pointedly looking at Mike and hiding the hints of a teasing smile.

"Well, yeah, usually—" Will started.

"Ignore her." Mike cut in. "She's just trying to remind me of a time *very long ago* where I was unable to form coherent sentences."

El giggled and Will looked confused.

"Okay, then?" Will questioned. He turned to El. "I'll see you tomorrow, then."

He weirdly looked at Mike and went back to his desk to grab his things.

"Alright then." Mike turned to look at El. "No need to make me look like even more of an idiot in front of my friends."

"But it makes me laugh." El pleaded. "And you do that well enough on your own."

"I don't find it very funny." Mike joked.

"C'mon it wasn't even that big of a deal. You just invited me over to your house after school to *study*." She shrugged.

Mike glanced around the room, looking to see if anyone was listening. It seemed like everyone else had already left. "I'll have you know that it was a totally *regular*...Wait a minute I didn't even invite you over, I merely stated the fact that *all of my friends usually hang out at my house after school*. That's it."

"Totally." El nodded. "I totally agree with you."

"Whatever." Mike laughed, shaking it off. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow in calculus."

"What's your first period?" El asked him.

"I have a spare. You?"

"Bio. Although if you wanted I could skip it and we could work out an actual schedule for the tutoring stuff." El suggested.

"Wait, uh, what? Just *skip* class?" Mike shockingly asked. "Won't you, like, get in trouble?"

El laughed and rolled her eyes. "I'm the chief of police's daughter. What, are they gonna do? Call him and say I skipped? All the school ever does is tell me *not to do it again*."

Mike blanched. "What about the stuff you miss in class?"

El held her hands up to her face, in a faux shocked expression. "Oh the horror!"

"Wow." Mike said. "I could never do that."

"Yeah, I figured that out. You don't strike me as a class-skipper, or rule-breaker."

Mike nodded.

"So, what, do you mind if I show up during your spare?"

"Oh, uh, not at all. If you want to. I'll just be in the library or something."

"Alright, then." El nodded. She got up and picked up her things.

Mike stood up too, and looked around the class again. It was completely empty. Not even their teacher was there. He turned and saw Will exasperatedly waiting by the door for them.

"Right, then. I guess I'll see you tomorrow, then." Mike gave her a small nod, which she reciprocated.

"I'll see you in the library." El confirmed. "And let's not get distracted in there. We should probably *actually* figure out a schedule."

"What?" Mike said appalled. "*Distracted?* What do you think we'll be doing in there."

"Chill, nerd." El said. "It just seems like every time we try and figure out the schedule we spend too much time *unfocused*."

"What?" Mike muttered as he walked to Will, El following behind him. "I'm focused."

"*Sure you are.*" She falsely agreed, patting him on the arm before leaving. "See ya later, Will."

"Goodbye!" He cheerily said.

Once she was gone, Will turned to Mike and started walking in the direction of the AV room. "So you two seem pretty friendly."

"What? Yeah, she's pretty cool."

"She better be." Will muttered. "I've been waiting after class for like, ten minutes."

"Wait? Class has been over for ten minutes?" Mike asked.

"Yeah...We're already late for AV Club."

"Wow. My bad, I guess. We just talked for longer than I thought we

did."

"You two have been talking the entire class. Literally, everyone realized it."

"They did?" Mike asked, eyes wide. "Whatever. I don't care what they think."

Will hummed. "If that were true, we wouldn't be eating lunch in the AV room every day."

"We don't eat there because of what other people think. We do it to avoid Troy and his friends."

Will only hummed again. "C'mon, let's go to the AV room."

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"You're doing it all wrong!" Lucas yelled over Dustin's shoulder.

"How can I be doing it wrong? There's only one way to splice footage." He retorted.

Mike sighed and rolled his eyes. Apparently, Will had the same idea. Mike saw him shaking his head with his hand covering his face.

This was *not* their first argument since they all met up at the end of school for AV Club. Lucas was too much of a control freak, Dustin wasn't gentle enough with the footage and Mike was getting fed up with all of their arguing.

Sure they bickered a lot, just in general. But when they started working on this project during AV Club, the amount they argued increased tenfold.

And it was always over *small* stuff. Like which teacher they should introduce first, or which teacher they were introducing *last*.

Will looked like he was going crazy, trying to defuse any and all arguments between the group. Mike figured it wouldn't be long

before he cracked.

But just as quickly as *this* argument started, it ended. Apparently after a smidge of resistance Lucas folded. He didn't seem to have the energy to continue arguing, instead slumping back in his chair and groaning.

"Aaaaahhhhhh." He groaned, sinking further and further into the chair.

Will just sighed of relief, since he wouldn't need to defuse another argument.

"Maybe we should take a break?" Mike suggested. "We made good progress today. We can work on it again on Thursday."

"I'm starving." Dustin mentioned.

"You're always hungry."

"We can get food at my place." Will said. "My mom can go out to get a pizza once we get there."

"Thank God." Muttered Dustin.

The boys packed up the video supplies and any other thing they used before heading out.

They each took their own vehicles to Will's house. It made his small driveway a bit too crowded, but that was alright.

They all piled through the front door, getting too crowded and impatient to wait one at a time.

"Would you hurry up?"

"I'm taking my shoes off."

"Well, you're crowding the way."

"We're trying to get through."

"Well, *sorry*." Dustin said, not sounding very apologetic. "Next time I'll

just track my muddy shoes everywhere in Will's house."

"Thank you."

"Actually, I don't think my mom would like that." Will piped in.

The boys headed towards Will's living room and set up their homework.

"Mom, we're home!" Will called out to his mother.

"Hey kids." Joyce greeted them, walking out from the hallway. "How are you?"

There was a chorus of *Good's* and *Fine's*.

"I'll go and get the pizza, if you want?" Mrs. Byers asked the kids.

Will nodded. "Yeah, thanks."

Joyce grabbed her keys and opened the door, peering out of it. "Did you guys leave me room to get out of the driveway?"

"Uhh."

Their cars had perfectly trapped Will's mom's car, surrounding it on all sides.

A couple of *sorrys* were muttered.

"I can't get the pizza, then." Joyce stated. "One of you will need to go get it."

Mike looked outside. He knew his car was probably the closest to the road, since he had gotten to Will's house last. His was the easiest to back out of the Byers' driveway.

He sighed. He had just gotten all of his math homework setup on the coffee table, squished amongst all of his friends' textbooks and binders.

"I can get the pizza." He reluctantly offered. "My car is the one that'll be the easiest to drive out."

"Thank you." Joyce said. She pulled some cash out of her purse. "Here, you get to keep the change."

"Uh, is it too late for me to *also* get the pizza?" Dustin said, after hearing the prospect of free money.

"You can ride with me." Mike offered, glad he wouldn't be going alone. "You aren't getting the change though."

Dustin stood up, making way for the door, and patted Mike's shoulder on the way there. "Ahh, Michael. We can negotiate on the way there."

"Don't call me Michael." Mike frowned, but followed Dustin to his car. "You guys want anything specific? Or..."

"Just get the regular."

Mike figured that's what he'd end up getting, but he always asked, in case one of their friends suddenly became vegan or something.

"You aren't getting the change." Mike said, closing the door of his car and putting his seatbelt on.

"Yeah, I figured." Dustin said. "I just wanted to go out. I finished my homework already and the guys don't talk much when they're in the *zone* working."

Mike nodded, understanding where Dustin was coming from. He pulled out of the Byers' driveway and made their way towards the pizza shop. "Well, we do talk. It's just about the homework we're doing."

"So, since you happen to not be doing any homework..." Dustin said. "When do you think you'll finish the next campaign?"

Mike laughed. "What do you mean? We *just* did one the weekend before school started. It's been like *a week*."

"Exactly! I'm dying over here." Dustin nodded. "We gotta figure out our plans for this weekend."

"Well, the campaign should be finished by this weekend." Mike had

been working on it whenever he got a spare moment after finishing his homework. "If I'm able to finish my homework tonight then that'll give me some more time to work on it."

The next campaign the Party did was by far going to be the biggest, longest, *coolest* campaign that they've ever done.

Mike's been keeping it a secret, writing smaller campaigns to play in between the times he was working on *this* campaign. He doesn't want his friends to know the *awesomeness* that will be their next campaign. He just has to put some finishing touches on it, and figure out a cool name for it.

Before this, their longest campaign was just over ten hours long. They completed it during the summer. Mike had started on the new campaign as soon as the other one was finished. And after an entire summer passed, he's nearly finished it.

He was practically bouncing up and down in his seat from the prospects of this new campaign.

And his friends didn't even know about it yet!

"Dude, are you alright?" Dustin side-eyed him.

"What?" Mike said, letting his obvious grin fall into a neutral expression. "I'm fine."

They made it to the pizza shop and Mike and Dustin exited the car.

The front door of the shop was propped open and the aroma of cheesy pizza wafted towards them. Mike took a deep breath in, relishing in the heavenly scent.

"That smells amazing."

Dustin only nodded and walked forward.

Mike allowed his legs to carry him towards the source of the smell.

He was shaken out of his stupor, however, when he noticed two girls laughing in the window of the shop, eating some pizza.

He stopped in his tracks and squinted...

Is that...?

Dustin stopped and looked behind him when he realized Mike was no longer following him. "What are you doing?"

"Is that El and Max?" Mike pointed at the window of the pizza shop.

"Uh, yeah, looks like it." Dustin confirmed.

"Oh, cool, cool." Mike nonchalantly said, patting the wrinkles out of his shirt and brushing a hand through his hair.

Dustin rolled his eyes. "Are you ready to see your girlfriend, El, yet?"

Mike blanched. "She's not my girlfriend."

"Sure. And you two haven't been talking *a lot* during the past couple of days."

"What? We've only talked a couple of times... Not *a lot*?"

"I don't know man, from what I've heard, you two talk, *a lot*."

"What? Who are you talking about this stuff to?"

"Word gets around about how a cool person like El, has been seen talking to a nerd like you."

"People are seriously *gossiping* about us?"

"So you admit there's an *us*?"

"No. There is no *us*. We are just friends."

"Well, I wouldn't mind." Dustin said. "If you started dating El. It would make the rest of the party pretty cool."

"Well, I don't know how many times I can say it, but we are *just* friends...Wait. Are they looking at us?"

Mike stared at the two girls on the other side of the window. They

were *definitely* looking back at the two of them.

Mike's eyes widened and he slowly looked at Dustin. "They are definitely looking at us."

"Well, act natural. You aren't going to get a girlfriend by being weird."

Mike rolled his eyes, but they continued forward, into the pizza shop. Mike could feel El's and Max's eyes on him as he walked in, while Dustin just enthusiastically smiled.

"Hello Michael!" El said, once they entered the shop. "What are you doing here?"

El stood up and walked over to them by the entrance. Max followed her.

"Hey nerd." She said with a smile.

Mike didn't mind the *nerd* comment coming from Max anymore, since he knew she was just joking.

"Hello ladies." Dustin said, piping up. "I am here, too."

"Hello, Dustin." El amended.

Max nodded her head at him.

"Ignore him." Mike said, shaking his head. "We were just getting a pizza."

"Well, that seems pretty obvious since you're at a *pizza* place." El teased.

Mike smiled and waved his arms around. "What do you mean? You're the one who asked what we were doing here."

Dustin sighed and grabbed the crumpled bill in Mike's hand. He walked up to the counter.

Mike darted his head to Dustin, confused.

"Hi, could I get a..." Dustin started to say, but Mike stopped listening, relaxing when Mike realized Joyce's money wasn't being robbed.

"So..." Mike asked. "What about you guys? What are you doing here?"

"We were just getting pizza." El mocked.

Mike rolled his eyes but laughed. El joined in, but Max crossed her arms and side-eyed El.

"So...are the rest of your friends here?" Max asked him, looking around.

Lucas, Mike reckoned. "No, it's just me and Dustin right now. We're getting the pizza for the rest of us. We're all at Will's right now."

Max nodded casually.

"Lucas, included."

"What, I-I didn't say anything..." Max glared instead of continuing to explain herself.

El busted out laughing and Mike smiled at her. Her eyes were filled with mirth. Even Max had hints of a smile peeking out from under her glare.

Dustin returned to them, stating the pizza would only take ten or eleven minutes. They all went to sit down. El and Max's previous seats weren't large enough for the four of them, so they opted to move to a corner booth.

Just by happenstance Mike and El sat beside each other, with Dustin and Max on either end.

They all joked around, talking and laughing. Dustin was more relaxed, unlike the last time he had seen the girls in the cafeteria.

Their pizza order was called, and Mike had to admit he was a bit disappointed that he had to leave. He glanced over at El. She was already looking at him. Sitting side by side in a restaurant booth was by far the closest he's been to her, yet. Closer than when they sat

beside each other at lunch and closer than when they sit beside each other in English.

Mike examined her. El's brown hair was messy but it looked good, he thought. Her whiskey eyes were playful. He gave her a small, tentative smile as he prepared to leave.

"Are you guys *actually* staring into each other's eyes right now?" Dustin interrupted.

"What? N-no." Mike said convincingly.

Apparently, it wasn't convincing, though, since Max burst out laughing and Dustin was staring right at them.

Mike avoided looking at El. He didn't want to see her reaction to Dustin's accusations, but he quickly risked a side glance. A blush was creeping up her neck, although Mike's face was full-blown red at this point.

"Uh, anyway." Mike half-yelled. "We need to go now. It was nice seeing you, though?"

It seemed like more of a question as Mike scrambled out of his seat, his arm knocking against El's a couple of times, since they were so close together in the booth.

Max nodded, a knowing smirk on her face.

El was pointedly looking down at the ground now. But she slightly peeked up and smiled at him. "See ya tomorrow." She said.

"Yeah, see ya..." Mike said.

"Are you guys done? Can we go now?" Dustin asked, teasing Mike some more. "Nice seeing you." He shot to the girls.

Dustin all but dragged Mike back to the car. Mike caught glimpses of the girls through the windows, but the booth was too far away.

They entered Mike's car and sighed.

"That was interesting." Mike said, slightly embarrassed still.

"Yes. It was."

After a moment of silence, Mike piped up. "Can I have the change?"

alright so this is the third chapter. writing this is soooo much fun. although i've been staying up until like, 4 am just writing so my sleep schedule is permanently destroyed. thanks i guess, lol. not much to say for this AN since it's currently 4 am and i'm soooo tired. so like, favourite/follow if you want, review if you want. those would be super cool. All mistakes are mine and I hope you all enjoyed.

4. chapter four

hi there. doing a quick poll. what's the ideal chapter length. For reference, each chapter as of right now is around 4500, this chapter is almost exactly 4500. Would you like shorter chapters? Longer chapters? Or for the chapter length to stay the same? also i know i'm a bit late with this chapter, but I fell asleep, my bad

Words w/out AN: 4505

Pairing(s): Mileven, Lumax

I own nothing.

the social system: chapter four

The early morning sun was bright, but the cool autumn breeze was chilly. So El left her home with a combination of sunglasses and a sweater. Walking in the school parking lot felt pretty cool, since the sunglasses were new and she felt pretty bitchin' in them. There weren't many people in the parking lot in the morning, although the first bell had just rung.

Instead of entering the front door like she usually would, El headed over to a side door that led to the library.

El opened the door and walked into the library for the first time in three years. In her entire high school career, not once has she visited the library before.

It was fairly large. The floor was carpeted, unlike the rest of the school which was some shiny linoleum tile. On her left, a set of bookcases were packed with books of varying sizes, and on her right was a group of tables and chairs.

There were a few people spread amongst the tables, but she noticed Mike sitting in the furthest corner.

El smiled and walked over to him. He looked up when she got closer

and smiled back.

"You're wearing sunglasses *inside*?" He asked, incredulous. "That's pretty badass. Also kind of redundant."

"What can I say, I am *really* cool." She shrugged, laughing at her sarcastic comment and removing her sunglasses.

Mike nodded, as if he was agreeing with her *cool* comment.

"Oh god, don't tell me you think I'm some *super-cool popular chick*." She groaned.

"Uhh, but you are pretty cool?" He said confused.

El sighed. "For some reason, everyone thinks I'm a super-cool badass-"

"That's what Dustin said, yeah." Mike nodded.

"Well, Dustin is feeding you lies." El said. "Everyone thinks I'm super-cool, just because my dad is the chief of police. It's so lame."

It was weird. El felt like the entire school had some sort of obsession with her. They called her popular but the only person she hung out with was Max. They called her cool, but El doesn't really do much of anything to deserve that title.

"Well I think you're super-cool because you're pretty funny and kind and stuff."

El tilted her head and smiled. "Aww. That's sweet."

She watched as Mike blushed. "You're pretty cool, too, Mike."

He laughed and shook his head. "Now, I know you have to be joking."

"I'm serious!" El argued. "You and your friends seem really nice. They care about you and that's cool."

"As much as I hate it, me and my friends are *nerds*. We watch geeky movies and play board games. And we actually *try* in school."

"Well, what's wrong with being a nerd, then?"

"People like Troy..." Mike muttered.

El nodded, understanding what he meant. Troy was always harassing *someone*, whether it was Mike or his friends.

A few moments of silence passed by.

"Well, that was pretty deep and meaningful. I feel like we learned something deeper about each other." El deadpanned in a joking way, trying to relieve some tension. She checked her watch. "And it's only half-past eight."

Mike laughed. "Yeah. I didn't think it'd get so serious. I just came here to study."

El sat up and snapped her fingers at him, a memory tingling in the back of her head. "Wait! It's like we learned each other's, uh, we learned the s-superhero thing..."

El thought for a moment. "It's like we learned our... tragic backstories! Yeah. It's like we just learned each other's origin stories, or something like that. From like, comic books and stuff!"

Mike's jaw dropped. He gaped at her for what seemed like a minute straight, without even blinking or talking or anything. El started to feel self-conscious under his scrutiny.

"Is it, uh, is it not origin story?" El asked. "Is it something different?"

Mike wildly shook his head. "No no. You got it right. It's an origin story or backstory or whatever."

"What's wrong then?" El asked, slightly blushing because of the way Mike was looking at her.

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong." Mike exhaled. "I'm just *impressed* that you knew something about comic books."

El's face tinged red at his compliments. She averted her eyes, instead noticing the few people that were in the library were giving them a death glare. El cringed. Maybe they were being too loud...

She refocused on Mike instead. "Well, thank you, but I *do* know how to use words." She pointedly said.

"I didn't mean it like *that*. I'm just saying...Someone like *you* shouldn't know about origin stories." He leaned closer to her, whispering. "Are you a *secret nerd*?"

El laughed, before quickly stifling herself. She wanted to avoid the negative attention they were getting in the once silent library. "No. I am not a *secret nerd*. But I've heard the phrase before and it seems pretty self-explanatory."

Mike shook his head. "I still can't believe-"

El shushed him, holding a finger up to his lips, but unable to fully close the gap with the table in the way. "We need to be quiet. The people in the library are getting mad at us."

He leaned in and whispered. "I still can't believe you spoke in *nerd*." Mike extended an arm and attempted to poke her face. "Are you even *real*?"

"Yes, I'm real." She swatted his poking arm away. "Now c'mon. Don't we have a schedule to work out for my *tutoring*?"

"I mean...We do. But I want-"

"Shhh!" El interrupted.

"I wanna know if you know anything else about comic books." Mike said in a hushed tone.

"There's like, Superman...and Batman?" She offered.

"I'm slightly disappointed. But it's okay, I'll just teach you it all."

El leaned in, whispering. "I'm pretty sure that you need to be teaching me *something else*."

She watched as Mike's face turned white. "Um, what, uh, I mean...I-I."

El just tilted her head, confused, until she realized and her face flushed. "Tutoring! I meant tutoring. That's it. Just *tutoring*."

Mike shakily laughed. "Haha. Good. That's what I thought you meant...I wasn't thinking about you meaning *anything* else."

Well, that was an obvious lie, even El could figure that out. She felt awkward because *no*, she didn't mean some lesson on making out, but the idea placed itself in her thoughts and for some reason wouldn't leave.

"...kissing..." She heard him mutter under his breath.

"What did you just say?" She chose to say.

"Uh, nothing? I said nothing?"

Mike released a long exhale, before calmly setting his face on the table.

El watched as his floofy hair settled in a mess around his head.

A moment passed before he lifted his head. "So we were going to figure out a schedule, right?"

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They agreed on after school on Mondays, Wednesdays and maybe they might meet up on the weekend, or something, if they have time. Mike said he couldn't do Tuesdays and Thursdays because of AV Club. And El couldn't do Fridays or Saturday mornings because she hangs out with Max. It's been a tradition of sorts that started one day some time long ago, and hasn't stopped since.

Getting their study schedule worked out, El even mentioned dropping by every now and then during his first period spare.

"For fun." She had said.

Mike had only blushed as a response.

She and Mike walked to Calculus together and only received *a few* looks from random classmates. They were probably wondering what they were doing, walking the halls together, but El dutifully ignored them.

When they entered the class, Max also gave her a *look*. El glared back at her friend, mouthing back the name *Lucas*.

Over the past couple of days, Max had been teasing her nonstop about *whatever* it was that was happening between her and Mike.

So, El started teasing Max about her *obvious* crush on Lucas. Whenever El mentioned his name, her face would become redder than her hair. It was funny to watch, but El knew her friend and figured Max would somehow find a way to bring it up a notch.

Mike sat down and El took her seat behind him, smiling when he watched her walk past.

Max leaned into El, "Why'd you skip first?" She asked.

"I was with Mike." El whispered.

"*Oh my god*. You seriously ditched first period to hang out with a boy?"

"No!"

"Well, technically, yes."

"We were figuring out a schedule for when he would tutor me."

"*Just tutoring*, right?"

"Yes! Just tutoring. Gosh you really won't shut up about this, huh?"

"Considering you left me all *alone* in Biology..."

"I think I told you that I was skipping..."

"I might've said *I* was skipping. I can't really remember."

"Attention, please." Their teacher called out, as she got ready to start

the class.

And that's where El stopped paying attention.

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Before she knew it, class was over. El gathered her things and waited as Max did the same.

She noticed Mike stand up, hastily shoving his binders into his bulging backpack.

"You know..." El started. "If you put any more books in there, I think your backpack will explode."

"I've had this for three years and it's been fine so far."

She watched as he struggled to lift his bag and rest it on her desk.

"How heavy is that thing?" Max commented.

"The usual." Mike shrugged.

Max attempted to lift his bag. She successfully was able to haul it.

"You've been carrying this much weight for three years?"

Mike nodded.

"You must be secretly jacked then. Like this thing is seriously heavy."

"Uhh, thanks?"

"Let me try." El said, reaching out for the bag.

Max slid it her way.

She grabbed the soft handle and pulled up as hard as she could. She'd like to say that she lifted it with no problem.

But it was *seriously* heavy. Her arm shook with the effort and she could barely lift it a couple of centimetres above the desk.

Max smirked as Mike slung the backpack on.

"Alright then." El said. "Walking around school with that must be its own workout."

They started walking out of the classroom and Mike laughed. "More like a personal torture device. I think it's giving me early onset back problems, like scoliosis, or something. Three binders, three textbooks, a couple of books from the library and my lunch seem to add up to a lot of weight."

"What?" Max asked. "I have like *three* things in my bag."

"Oh, I also have an extra shirt in here."

"Why do you need an extra shirt?" El asked.

"Well, I took gym first year. And I needed to have a change of clothes for that."

"So you've had the same shirt in that bag for like, three years now?"

"What? No! Of course not. I change which shirt is in here every now and then. But some time during tenth grade, I spilt chocolate milk all over my shirt and had to sit through the rest of the day without a change of clothes. So from now on, I always have an extra shirt nearby."

El and Max laughed at his story. They all stopped at the intersection that led to the cafeteria.

"Well, this is me." Mike said.

"You could have lunch with us, again?" El offered, as Mike slowly backed toward the AV room.

"Your friends, too." Max added.

"Oh, thanks, but the guys and I are working on a project in the AV room."

El nodded, slightly disappointed.

"You guys could, uh, eat lunch with us? In the AV room." Mike offered. "I don't know if there's room, but we could probably clear some space on the table and bring in a couple of extra chairs."

El looked at Max, who just shrugged.

"Uh, yeah. We could do that. If it's not a problem. As long as your friends don't mind or anything."

"They won't mind." Mike said. "I'm sure Lucas will be thrilled."

"Oh, shut up." Max groaned, lightly punching Mike on the arm.

Mike fell in step with her and Max, leading them to the AV room. El felt slightly anxious. This would be the first time she hasn't had lunch in the cafeteria. Their lunch table would be empty. Although she doubted *that* many people would notice. Who would go out of their way to see if she and Max were eating lunch that day?

They walked up to the door and Mike opened it for them, although she thought it would probably open if she tried to open it.

"Hey Mike." The guys sitting at the table said, not bothering to lift their heads from what they were doing.

"Hey, guys." Mike said, walking to grab a couple extra chairs. He cleared a couple spots on the table, moving wires and electronics and stuff.

El took a tentative step forward and Max followed her.

"Here. You guys can sit here."

"We're already sitting do-" Lucas said, looking up. "Uhhhhh." He said once he saw her and Max.

"Oh. Hello." Will greeted with a small wave.

El smiled and nodded her head.

"What's happening- Oh." Dustin said. "Hey guys. What's up?"

"Not much." Max replied. "Mike invited us for lunch."

"Did he?" Lucas squeaked.

"Cool." Will said. "We're working on a video project right now."

"That's cool." El said. "What for?"

"It's kinda like an introduction video." Dustin answered. "For all the staff and faculty members of the school."

El nodded and took a seat beside Mike, who had pulled out a sandwich.

Her and Max sat in silence, as they ate their lunch and Will, Lucas and Dustin worked on their video thing.

"Usually we talk more." MIke said, mouth stuffed with half a sandwich. "But they're in the *zone* right now. They're pretty focused so I'd doubt if they even notice me talking right now."

El didn't mind the silence. It was interesting to watch as the boys worked on whatever it is they were doing.

She noticed every now and then Dustin would casually look up at her and Max, as if he couldn't believe they were actually sitting there and he had to reassure himself.

And she didn't *not* notice how Lucas was also casually looking up at her and Max, but that was definitely for a different reason.

The boys' progress on their video thing dwindled down and Will called for a lunch break.

Mike waved his sandwich in the air. "Way ahead of you."

"Well, you're on top of things, huh?" Max commented, eliciting a laugh from Lucas while Mike glared.

El patted his arm. "Don't worry, you eating a sandwich before anyone else was *super* cool. You're like a hipster." She sarcastically reassured him.

He shifted his glare to her, now. For some reason, her words didn't seem like they made him feel better.

"So, tell me about your video thing." Max said.

"What do you wanna know?" Will asked.

"I don't know. Do you guys usually do this kind of stuff?"

"Yeah, sometimes." Lucas answered this time.

El stopped focusing on their conversation. Instead turning towards Mike. Her and Mike sat on the far side of the table. Kind of tucked away, while Max and the rest of the boys were closer to the other side.

"This was nice." El said to just Mike, knocking her knee against his and lowering her tone so only he could hear. "Inviting us here, I mean."

Mike leaned in. "It wasn't a problem or anything. I thought it might be fun or something."

"Well, it was nice. Usually we just eat lunch in the cafeteria."

"Eating lunch in the *cafeteria*? Like a *regular* person. How very *not* hipster of you." Mike teased.

"I guess you'll just have to teach us how to be ahead of the trends." El joked.

"I guess we can pencil it in some time. It won't be easy, though."

"Oh I'm sure it won't be." El nodded, playing along. "It'll probably be harder than the *dreaded* calculus work we're gonna do tonight."

"Tonight?" Mike asked her confused.

El rolled her eyes. "Don't tell me you forgot already. We agreed on Mondays and-"

"Wednesdays." Mike finished. "I didn't forget. It just slipped my mind."

El shook her head. "You totally would've forgot about me if I didn't bring it up."

Mike looked her in the eyes before his gaze fluttered to his fidgeting fingers. "I could never forget you." He whispered.

El blushed when he said *that*. She couldn't form any words. Anything she tried to say got caught in her throat. They *way* he had said that had left her speechless. His words were so *raw*.

A small smile crept onto her face and she looked down at his hands, which had become perfectly still. They were both looking down, but she could see the blush on his neck out of the corner of her eye.

"Well, aren't you charming?" She mumbled, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

"Yeah..." Mike said scratching the back of his neck. He wouldn't look her in the eye.

El cleared her throat and straightened the wrinkles in her jeans. "So, what do you think we're gonna do tonight?" El offered to try to clear the tension.

"I don't know. I think I'm probably gonna rewatch one of the movies I have."

"I meant for tutoring."

"Oh." Mike realised. "Yeah, that makes sense. I think we should start with factoring. There's a couple different ways to factor so we could go over them."

"Okay." El nodded. "Cool."

They were so engrossed in each other that they didn't notice the other people around the table talking.

Max tapped her on the arm. "El."

El tore her eyes away from Mike. "What's up?"

"Lunch is almost over. We need to get ready for gym."

El glanced at the clock. Five to twelve. Lunch was almost over and El still needed to grab her clothes and change.

"I left my clothes in my car, I think."

"You *think*?"

"Well, they should be in there. But I might've...*forgot*?"

"Well, I don't have another change of clothes." Max said.

"Doesn't Mike always carry an extra shirt?" Will piped in, smiling.

"Uhh..." Was all Mike said, as he glanced between his bag and El.

"Yes?"

"Well, I might still have my shirt in my car..." El weakly protested.

"You can go check. And if you don't, you can borrow Mike's." Max suggested. "If that's cool with you, Mike?"

Mike shook his head. "Yeah. I don't see any problem."

"Okay then." El said. "Cool, cool, cool. I'm just gonna go check if I have the shirt, then." She gestured in the direction of the parking lot, everyone else in the room was watching her.

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So, Mike's shirt was too big for her.

Yes, she had to wear his shirt.

It made sense since he was about a head taller than her. But she figured she didn't realize until she put his shirt on and watched as it went past her thighs.

El tied a spare hair elastic around the bottom of his shirt, so it wouldn't flop around everywhere, which left a small exposed strip of

skin around her stomach. Technically their school had a dress code and she *doubted* her wearing the shirt like this allowed, but no one had told her to take out the elastic yet, so she kept it in.

The shirt was pretty plain. Grey with some spaceship on the front or something. El figured it would probably be more nerdy or embarrassing or something if she actually knew what the design on the shirt was supposed to be.

It smelled like Mike, which was whatever cologne he used. It wasn't a bad smell, slightly comforting, if anything. It felt like Mike was right beside her, encompassing her when she put the shirt on. El reckoned this is probably why girls liked to wear their boyfriend's sweaters all the time.

Not like Mike was her, uh, *boyfriend*, or anything. He just leant her his shirt since she had forgotten hers. That's it.

El still felt weird taking his clothes, though. She felt like sharing clothes was just something couples did. Although she had occasionally borrowed clothes from Max. From the look of Mike's wide eyes, it looked like he felt the same way, although he didn't have any objections about giving her the shirt.

And the *grin*. The shit-eating grin on Will's face as he suggested the idea. Like he knew what he was doing and what it could *mean*.

Whatever though. She didn't care.

Okay, she cared a *bit*. But the smell of Mike was hazing her vision and she *really* didn't know what that meant.

In gym, they were running laps. Which was lame, but El didn't protest. The most annoying part was her hair that whipped back and forth on every step.

Max slowed down from ahead of her, matching her pace so they ran side by side.

"How's the shirt?"

"It's just a shirt."

"Is it though? Is it really?"

"Yes!"

"I don't know... The way you looked when Will brought up the idea suggested otherwise."

"I'll have you know, Will is a shit-disturber."

"You guys weren't that subtle, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"During lunch! You two were staring at each other with lovey-dovey eyes, completely oblivious to anything else that was happening around you. You were blushing every five seconds and Mike wasn't any better."

"He's a...cool...guy." El lamely offered.

"Oh, I'm sure he is. How's the shirt, again?"

"Shut uuupppp." El drew out the last word.

"I'm serious, though. You and Mike were off in your own world, having your own conversation. I literally said your name out loud, like, three times and you didn't notice until I tapped you on the arm."

"We were just...talking?"

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you have a *crush* on him." Max said. "Actually wait, I think I've been suggesting that for the past *three* days."

"I could say the same about you and Lucas."

"Well, maybe I do." Max shot back defiantly. "At least I could admit it."

El groaned. *Did she have a crush on Mike?*

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Okay, so El had a crush on Mike.

She had only been talking to Mike for *three* days but she's already realized that he's perfect. He's sweet, funny, kind, generous and more. By far one of the most genuine people she's met at this school. Everyone else in school that she has ever talked to, *except for Max, of course*, had treated her as some kind of idol. While it seemed like Mike actually wanted to talk to her, and get to know her.

She came to this revelation during their first study session. He was trying to balance a pencil on his lip, like it was a mustache, and El couldn't contain her laughter. They had already been shushed three times by the librarian, and they had moved closer to the far end of the library in an attempt to avoid her.

As he focused on balancing the pencil, El focused on him. She stared at his face. Curls of his hair came down over his forehead. His freckles radiated across his defined cheekbones and his brown eyes were focused on watching the pencil.

El didn't know if she had a type, but she didn't see anything wrong with the guy in front of her.

She was still wearing his shirt during their tutoring session, something Mike had commented on as she walked into English.

She couldn't find the willpower to take it off after gym, instead deciding to wear it for the rest of the day.

Not to mention, she noticed how his eyes had flitted down to the revealed strip of skin when she walked into class. She had watched as his face flushed and he pulled at the collar of his shirt.

"I like your shirt." He commented.

"I like it too." She agreed and boldly said. "I might need to keep it."

She laughed at the face he made when he heard that.

But then their teacher requested the class' attention and Mike and El busied themselves reading.

After class El and Mike walked to the library together. She noticed the *look* that Will was giving them but she easily disregarded him and pulled Mike in the direction of the library.

And in Mike's defence, he had successfully taught her *some* factoring. Just not very *much*. But after like, twenty minutes El's brain couldn't take anymore and anything Mike had previously said was slowly leaking out. She figured it'd be better to put a plug on what she had successfully learned and quit while they were ahead.

They instead spent the rest of their time in the library laughing and joking around. Trying to use pencils as fake mustaches and other fun things that would make the librarian glare at them.

El peered over at the clock in the corner of the room. Her dad would be home from work at the station soon, so she figured she should probably get ready to leave.

"I think I need to leave. My dad will get home soon." She told Mike.

Mike glanced at the clock. "Oh, wow. It's later than I thought it was."

"Hopefully this tutoring session was successful, and that you learned something." He continued on.

She learned *something* alright.

"Yeah, it was fun. Although my brain shuts off at like, the twenty-minute mark. So we might need to meet up more often than we first thought if we want to get through it all."

"Yeah." Mike jumped at the idea. "We could do that. We can figure it out tomorrow or something."

El was feeling fairly brave. So she stepped forward and extended her arms to hug Mike. He was stiff in her arms, but after a small gasp left his lips, he raised his arms and returned the hug.

El pulled away before she allowed herself to fully appreciate the hug, leaving it short enough to not send *too* many messages. "I'll see you tomorrow, Mike."

"What? Yeah, I-I'll uh see you tomorrow?"

El gathered her things, stuffing them in her bag and waved goodbye to Mike as she exited the library. She contained her giddiness until she was sure she was out of sight from Mike.

El wondered when she would tell Max about her personal discovery. Her friend would probably say something along the lines of "I knew it!" or "About time."

She reasoned that maybe she should just keep it to herself, for now.

El entered her car and drove home.

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"Hey kid." Her father called out to her, once he had gotten a proper look at her after coming in from work.

"What's up?" El asked.

"Who's shirt is that?"

hello! here is another chapter. i'm not gonna lie. i have no idea where i'm going with this fic lol. i have some semblance of a story in my head and transferring it into words and actually making it interesting is becoming kind of difficult. also theres a few key points/scenarios that i think i need to write about before the story is over that way it feels more complete but spacing them out is getting kinda weird.

either way i guess i'll just write until i can't anymore lol. as always, all mistakes are mine and I hope you all enjoyed.

also review pls, i truly appreciate them.

5. chapter five

i love you guys :)

Words w/out AN: 4900 +

Pairing(s): Mileven, Lumax

I own nothing.

the social system: chapter five

Mike had a lot of fun tutoring El. If that's what he could even call it, considering they spent 80% of their time joking around instead of actually tutoring.

Which on one hand, isn't a problem. Anytime Mike got to hang out with El was a good time. But on the other hand, if Mike actually wanted to help her *learn* something, then they're going to have to actually settle down and do *work* for an hour or two straight, every time they meet up.

Speaking of which, Mike needed a way to contact her. If he had to wait until they saw each other in Mrs. Sanders' calculus class then they'd never get anything done.

Which probably meant he had to ask for her *phone number*.

Which wasn't a big deal or anything, of course. Why would it be?

People who tutor other people have their phone numbers. *Friends* have each other's phone numbers. It shouldn't be that hard to ask for El's phone number, after all, he was *both* of those things.

He can do this. Why couldn't he do this? It's not even a big deal.

Although...

Max liked to tease him for stuff like this. His *friends* would probably tease him for something like this.

Maybe it'd be best to ask her for her number *alone...*

But like, that could make it seem like he was going to ask her... *on a date*, or something.

And Mike didn't want to make things uncomfortable for her. If Mike asked her on a date, and she said no, that would make every time they hung out in the future *weird*.

No. He had to ask her *casually*. Like he was just a friend trying to get in contact.

Which was what he *was*, right?

Maybe it'd be best to just wait until they met up in Mrs. Sanders' class.

Hey El, uh, c-could I have your phone number?

Mike blushed. Gosh, that sounded pathetic, even in his head. How did he manage to stutter? He didn't even say anything out loud, yet.

I need your phone number.

No, that sounded too desperate. Or maybe it sounded too assertive. Mike didn't know. He couldn't even *ask* her for her phone number, what was he going to do when she answered him. *If*, she answered him. That's assuming Mike would be able to find the courage to ask her at all.

No, Mike. I'm not giving you my number, nerd, he could imagine her saying.

Okay, maybe she wouldn't *insult* him, but rejection was still a very *possible* option.

And it's not like Mike was even asking her on a *date*! He just needed to set up *more* times to tutor her. Which is, like, a totally different thing.

Gosh, if Mike ever *did* ask her out on a date, his brain would probably shut down, or he'd go crazy, or something.

Not like he ever would *ask her on a date, or anything*. The idea hadn't drifted into his mind over the past couple of days. Not even once. This was the *first* time he's ever even thought about dating her. Yep.

It's not like he's looked into her eyes and found himself smitten. Imagining possible futures where he's asked her out and she hasn't said *no*.

It's not like just the sight of her made him smile. And whenever she laughed at one of his stupid jokes made his heart do summersaults.

So maybe he *did* want to ask her out.

But, just like with the phone number, *rejection* was a possibility Mike didn't want to face.

He could imagine El laughing at him if he asked her. Because *really*, why would she want someone like *him*?

He was a *nerd*, and as much as he hated it, it was true.

And El was some super *awesome* person, who was funny, kind. Just all-around cool to be with.

Not to say that Mike was *obsessed* with El, but he wasn't obsessed with her in the way *Dustin* was.

Dustin thought she was cool and would make the rest of *them* cool by hanging out with her. But in reality, El was her own kind of cool. Where she didn't care what other people thought. Being around people like that can't make you cool. You needed to realize that being *cool* isn't even that cool.

Wow. Mike really was a *hipster*. He has also never said the word *cool* so many times before.

But either way, El was more than some *superficial* status quo, developed by teenagers that went to the same school as her, but didn't actually *know* her.

Mike sighed. Realization and self-discovery were cool and all, but it didn't change the fact that rejection was still a very *real* possibility.

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"Hey, El." Mike said, catching up to her in the hallway at school.

"Hello, Michael." She replied, slowing down to let him walk in pace with her.

Mike scrunched his face up at the word *Michael*, making El laugh.

"What's up?"

Mike didn't answer her question, instead looking El over. Her hair was curled. That was new. Mike's only ever seen her with straight hair.

She bumped her shoulder against his upper arm when he hadn't said anything.

"I like your hair." He blurted.

"Thank you." El smiled, looking forward, before looking back to Mike. "You look like you need something from me."

It's just a number, Mike thought.

"Unless you came all the way over here to compliment my hair?" She teased.

"Um. I, uh, I need—" El raised her eyebrows at him when he couldn't form a coherent sentence.

"Can I have..." Mike slowly said, enunciating each word. He tilted his head. "...Your number?"

El eyes lit up. Probably glad he managed to spit out an understandable sentence.

She raised an eyebrow. "We've only been talking for three days, Mike. Already asking me out on a date?"

Mike blushed. "Uhh..."

"Because, I'll have you know, I prefer going out to eat, but I've really wanted to see this one new movie, so I wouldn't mind doing that, either."

Mike looked at El after his blush settled down. A twinkle in her eye told Mike she was teasing him.

"Haha. Funny *and* original." Mike said, sticking his tongue out at her.

"Wow," She replied. "Sticking your tongue out. Cute *and* mature."

Mike laughed, ignoring the *cute* comment. She was just being sarcastic anyway.

"I still need your number."

"And I need to go watch that movie."

"Noted." Mike said, storing the information for later. Did she want to see it with *him*? Or was she just saying it, in general. "But I need your number to make it easier for us to set up times to study. After all, we're probably going to need to meet up, like, twice as much."

"So you aren't asking me on a date?" She said coyly.

Mike looked at her. El was staring ahead. Her tone of voice hadn't changed and Mike didn't notice any disappointment.

"No." Mike said.

"Truly a disappointment." She nodded, smiling when Mike looked at her to let him know she was joking.

Something inside of him hoped she wasn't.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

Now, Mike hadn't officially *admitted* anything. As far as Mike was

concerned, he was perfectly happy spending an unhealthy amount of time in denial.

But Will cornered him before English class, demanding he spill the beans about what's happening between him and El.

"What?" Mike asked, incredulous. "Nothing's happening between us."

"Everyone knows that *something* is happening."

"Did the other guys put you up to this? Did they make you ask me?" Mike asked because Will never asked questions like this. Usually, he was the most sensitive to other people's feelings.

"No."

"Then why are you being so invasive?"

"Because you're my... friend?" Will suggested. "And I want my friend to be happy."

Mike shook his head. "Nothing is happening between me and El."

"Well, do you *want* something to happen?" Will asked, throwing Mike completely off guard.

"What? Uh, well... I mean- I guess I wouldn't mind-" He started to admit.

"Hey, guys!" El interrupted, making Mike *smack* his mouth closed to avoid blurting out anything else on the subject.

"What are you guys talking about?" She asked.

"Uhh..."

"The new D&D campaign we're doing this weekend." Mike supplied.

Will looked towards Mike, eyes wide. "You said we wouldn't be doing one this weekend."

"Ah, shit. Right. Uh, we won't be. That is correct." Mike nodded.

"Alright then, weirdos." El glared suspiciously at them before bounding off to her and Mike's seat.

"Are we actually gonna do a campaign this weekend?" Will asked.

"Can you keep a secret?" Mike asked although he's not sure why he did. *Obviously*, Will can keep a secret. He was probably the most trustworthy member of the Party.

Will nodded.

"We're doing a campaign alright. We're doing our *largest* campaign yet."

"Even larger than the one we did during the summer?" Will asked, astonished.

Mike nodded and a giant smile erupted on Will's face. "I want it to be a secret, to surprise the guys."

"Yeah, sure thing, man."

Mike watched Will head to his desk, ready to start the class. He wanted to surprise Will with the campaign, too, but at least he wasn't asking about his *small* crush on El anymore.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

"You guys are weird." El said when Mike sat down beside her in English.

"Please. Because you're *so* normal." Mike crossed his arms, laughing.

El shook her head and Mike found himself following her bouncing curls. "I'm better than normal. I'm *amazing*."

"And humble, too." Mike commented, *still* looking at the curls in her hair.

It's like he was captivated by them. He wanted to *touch* them, which

admittedly sounded weird, but Mike learned a long time ago (during the past few days, repressing his feelings for El) that you can't help the way you feel. You can only repress your feelings for so long.

"I like your hair, by the way."

"I'm pretty sure you said that already?" El grinned.

"Well, I wanted to say it again..." Mike bashfully said.

"Well, thank you." El said, looking forward and tucking a curl behind her ear.

Their English teacher called out to the class, prepared to start his lesson.

Mike turned to El, reaching out without thinking and tugging one of her curls lightly. He watched as it bounced up and down.

El didn't react or turn to look at him, instead staring at their teacher. He noticed the hints of a blush on her face. "Did you just *pull* one of my curls?"

"I did." Mike confirmed. "They are bouncy. Kinda like a spring, actually. You could probably determine the spring constant if we had the right tools to measure it." He spoke animatedly, his eyes lighting up when he spoke about a subject he was interested in. In this case, physics.

El stopped paying attention to the lesson. She looked at him. "The *spring constant*?"

"Yeah, it's a number that..." Mike started, before stopping. "Actually, that sounds nerdy. That probably just sounded really nerdy."

"What? No. It wasn't that nerdy." El shook her head. "Actually, *yes*. It was really nerdy. But that's okay."

Mike raised his eyebrows at her, not believing her.

"I'm serious!" She defended. "You were passionately talking about something you enjoy. That's not a bad thing. If anything it was *cute*."

"*Cute?*" Mike asked, scrunching his face together.

El blushed slightly, but nodded her head.

"Alright, then." Mike nodded, grabbing another curl and pulling it down, before turning to the front of the class to pay attention to their lesson.

She kicked his leg under the desk in response and Mike tried not to smile *too* hard.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

Their teacher had finished teaching the lesson and told the class to pull out their books and start reading.

El pulled out their copy of *King Lear* and opened it up to the last page they were on. Ever since Mike started reading with El he had actually started to *like* the book.

Shakespeare. He had started to *like* Shakespeare.

And maybe it was because El would playfully tease him, or they would make jokes as they read along together. She made the whole *reading experience* a lot more enjoyable.

Mike thought it was pretty funny. *He* was the one who did great in school, but only did *okay* in classes like English. While El was the one who needed tutoring, but seemed to be the one helping *Mike*, in English.

It's like payback, for tutoring her. Mike helped her in her math classes. She helped him in English.

During their reading time, Mr. Jacobs walked up to them.

"I have some good news, guys." He directed towards El and Mike, they both looked up to him. "We received the extra books needed for you two! I still need to put labels on them saying that they're the *property of the school* and stuff like that, but you guys won't need to

be partners anymore."

Mike blanched and looked at El. She wasn't smiling, which hopefully counted for *something*, but her expression was unreadable.

Mike on the other hand, wasn't that happy. He really liked reading with El. She made it way more fun than just reading on his own. He also suspected that she had only started reading because he had gone and made her that original copy of the homework. So, she felt like she had to make it up to him by actually trying in class.

But now they were both so far into the book that they didn't want to stop.

At least, that's what *Mike hoped*.

"You know..." Mike started to say, unsure of how to voice his thoughts.

But oh, Mr. Jacobs. I love reading with El, she makes it so much fun!

Yeah. Because that wasn't *weird*.

"It's not that big of a deal..." He heard El say beside him.

"Oh, please. You guys get the *new* books." Mr. Jacobs said with a smile before walking off.

El placed their book face down. They didn't say anything for a moment.

Mike looked at her and a small frown was on her face.

"You know..." Mike started. "My bag's already *so* heavy. I don't know if I'd even be able to *fit* another book in there..."

El smiled and nodded. "Exactly. I wouldn't want you to get more back pains or anything."

"Yeah." Mike agreed. "Maybe it'd just be best if we kept everything the same? You keep *our* book in your ridiculously light backpack."

"Yeah." El nodded enthusiastically, her eyes lighting up. "It just seems like the best and *safest* option for everyone involved. I keep the book and we can continue to read together."

Mike smiled and looked towards his hands. He was glad him and El were on the same page. For Mike's *safety* of course.

He watched El smile. She picked up *their* book and opened it to the bookmarked page.

Mike felt her press her foot against his leg under the desk. It felt *different* than when she playfully kicked him earlier. It was soft and lingered.

He knew what it meant. And although they technically hadn't said it out loud... Mike was glad he could read the book with El, too.

He pressed his foot against her leg in return, lingering for a moment or two longer than necessary.

And if their feet found each other *a couple more times* during the rest of the class, then so be it.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

"I'm sorry," Will said, walking up to Mike when he was alone after class.

Mike looked at him, confused. "For what?"

"For pressuring you about your feelings with El. You said I was being invasive and you're right." Will apologized.

"Dude. *You* were right." Mike looked around. "I *totally* have a crush on El. I've just been denying it the past few days because, well..."

"She's super cool and you aren't?" Will supplied helpfully.

Mike glared at him. "...Yes."

"Well, still. I should've been more respectful of your feelings."

"Dude, it's fine." Mike confirmed. "I don't wanna have to keep stuff like that from my *best* friends. I should've told you guys about it sooner. Maybe you would've been able to help me."

"Oh, wow. This is very unexpected." Will said. "I didn't think you'd actually admit anything."

"I guess I'm in a good mood."

The two started to walk towards the AV Club. The halls were empty so they could talk without fear of being overheard.

"I wasn't lying, either." Will said. "When I said that I wanted you to be happy. I think you should make a move on her."

"Let's slow down for a moment." Mike said, holding his hands up. "There is a *big* difference between *wanting* to ask her out, and *actually* doing it.

"She totally likes you back. If you asked her out, I'm sure she'd say yes."

"Okay, but what if she doesn't?"

"That's not gonna happen!"

"It totally could happen." Mike argued, refusing to believe Will, because let's face it El could literally choose *anyone* at this school to date.

"Dude." Will said, stopping in the middle of the hallway. "You need to stand up for yourself more. You need to have more self-confidence."

"Self-confidence?" They heard coming from an opening door.

Troy, Mike scowled.

"What do you want, *Troy*?" Mike said, crossing his arms.

"C'mon, Mike, we should just leave." Will suggested in a low tone.

Mike didn't move fast enough though, because Troy closed the distance between them quickly.

Did he hear what we were talking about? Mike thought. If he did, they were in trouble. Troy would have *no* problem spreading to the entire school that *Mike Wheeler had a hopeless crush on El Hopper*.

It didn't seem like he heard what they were talking about, though. Or else he would've made fun of them for it by now. He seemed to only catch the tail end of Mike and Will's conversation.

Still not good though, Mike thought. Since now Troy was going to make fun of his lack of confidence or some other stupid thing like that.

Mike looked at Will, who was slowly backing away. He seemed nervous, which was understandable, since Mike was pretty nervous, too.

"Lighten up, *nerds*." Troy spat. "You two were just having a conversation about how *Frogface*, here doesn't have any self-confidence. Don't let me interrupt you."

"What are you even doing here?" Mike asked although it was a stupid question. Mike knew there was football practise after school today. He should've just walked away like Will suggested.

"I'm on the *football* team. Which is way cooler than that nerdy video club you have with all your other friends."

"Cool." Will said dismissively, tugging Mike in any direction away from here.

"Hey, where are you guys off to in a hurry? Off to go make out or something?"

Will frowned and looked down. Mike scowled. "Don't say shit like that, dude. What is wrong with you?"

"Hey!" Troy said, sneering at Mike. "I heard about you and El. She's pretty hot, not gonna lie. You don't mind if I go for her, right? After all, you've got *fairy*, over there."

Mike stepped closer to Troy. *No one* said stuff like that to his friends. Not to Will, or El, or anyone. Sure, Troy had been a dick to them before, but he's never gone *this* far.

The predatory gleam in Troy's eyes when he mentioned El made him sick. And the *amusement* he got degrading Mike and his friends were borderline sociopathic.

"Man, the things I would do to her..." Troy maliciously smiled.

And Mike snapped. He took another step closer to Troy, clenching his fist, prepared to *finally* stand up for his friends, like Will said he needed to.

"Mike, stop." He heard behind him, but it didn't matter. Mike was seeing red and he needed to do *something*.

Troy reacted first though, shoving Mike *hard* when he got too close. Mike stumbled backwards, crashing into a row of lockers behind him before crumpling to the floor, landing on his arm.

Will rushed to him and Troy laughed.

"Losers..." He muttered, shaking his head before walking away.

Mike watched as Troy turned the corner before letting Will pull him up.

"Are you okay?"

Mike shook his head and rubbed his wrist. The adrenaline was wearing off and landing on his wrist didn't feel too great.

"God, I hate that jerk."

Will nodded. They started walking to the AV room again, this time in silence.

"My wrist is probably gonna bruise." Mike said, watching his skin turn red.

"We can put ice on it now?" Will suggested although Mike didn't

know where they would get any ice.

"We can do that when we all go to my house tonight." Mike waved it off, the movement causing a flare-up of pain.

Mike winced, he didn't think it was broken since he could move his fingers, but he wouldn't be surprised if it was either really badly bruised or sprained.

"God. Did you hear the things he said about you and El?" Mike asked Will. "It was terrible."

Will tried for a joke. "Well, now you can tell El you defended her honour. I'm sure that'll help you two get together."

"Are you kidding?" Mike asked, his shoulders slumped. "I couldn't even defend *myself*, much less my friends or her *honour*. Why would she want someone like that?"

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

"What the hell, man?" Dustin exclaimed when he heard what happened to Mike.

Lucas nodded in agreement. "Dude, Troy *sucks*. He was in the gym when I tried out for the basketball team, yesterday."

"Did you make it, by the way?" Will asked.

"Course I did." Lucas smirked. "But what are we gonna do about Troy?"

"What *can* we do?" Mike said, rubbing his wrist. "He's always been a jerk, but just then... he was a *creep*, too."

"Well, yeah. He said some weird shit about El, which is bad." Dustin said. "But he also *injured* you and made fun of Will. We gotta do something."

"We could egg his house?" Will suggested.

"It doesn't matter that he injured me." Mike shook his head. "I just don't like what he did to El or Will."

"Okay, we get that you're trying to stand up for your girlfriend or whatever." Dustin said. "But-"

"She's not my girlfriend." Mike interrupted automatically. He had gotten used to saying that whenever one of his friends had mentioned El.

"Dude. We're trying to help."

"No, you're trying to get *revenge*." Mike spat, apparently madder than he thought he was. He took a moment to calm down.

"We've never *egged* a house before. We haven't slashed tires or keyed cars, and we never will. Let's just work on the video project so I can get home and rest." Mike continued on.

Dustin sat back down in his chair and Lucas nodded. The room was quiet.

"Did anyone bring any snacks?" Lucas asked, breaking the silence.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

The boys were making *serious* progress on their video project. It should be almost halfway done by the end of the next AV Club meeting.

Sure, they bickered a lot, but they worked well as a team. It's one of the things that made their D&D campaigns so much fun.

The almost finished campaign Mike was secretly working on was the only thing on his mind. All thoughts of Troy had faded away and Mike was genuinely excited.

"Alright, so, Mike and El." Dustin said, holding up his hand to get everyone's attention. "Can we officially talk about this?"

Mike groaned. He placed his head facedown on the table and used his arms to cover his blush.

"Are you calling a *Party meeting*?" Will asked, as if the event was some *sacred* ritual.

The Party met *all* the time, whether it was to play video games at the arcade or like now, working in the AV room. But when a *Party meeting* was called for, it suddenly became serious. It was like a non-emergency Code Red.

"I think I am." Dustin confirmed.

"Alright then." Lucas nodded. "Meeting adjourned."

"Are you using that word right?"

"*Adjourned*? I think so, yeah."

"Guys. Focus." Dustin snapped his fingers at them, pointing at Mike.

"Are we seriously calling a Party meeting for this?" Mike asked.

"Yes, Michael. This is serious."

Mike held his hands up in surrender. He figured if he wanted to tell his friends about his small, *tiny* really, crush on El, now may as well be the best time.

"What would you like to know?" Mike asked the other Party members.

"Are you and El dating?" Dustin asked, narrowing his eyes.

"And is Max single?" Lucas added on.

Dustin shook his head, shooting a glare at Lucas.

"Me and El are *not* dating." Mike answered. "And how am *I* supposed to know?"

"I don't know!" Lucas cried. "You've talked with her, like, *twelve* more times than me."

Dustin looked at Will, throwing his hands up in an *are you seeing this* gesture.

"So, you aren't dating her." Dustin said.

"Yes."

"Well, why not?" Dustin demanded. "She's pretty cool."

"What's with you and how *cool* she is?" Mike asked. "You've hung out with her for a bit. You've seen how *cool* she is. It's been like three days. Are you expecting to become *instantly* cool after talking to her?"

"*No!* Obviously not. That's a thing that happens over time. Maybe we need to hang out with her more..." Dustin said, stroking his non-existent beard. Mike didn't like the look on his face.

"Alright..."

There was a moment of silence as Mike watched Dustin *scheme*.

"Do you plan on asking her out?" Will asked.

"*No!*" Mike exclaimed.

"Why not? She would totally say yes if you did." Lucas said.

Will nodded.

"God, she's almost as bad as *you* are." Dustin said. "Every time you two talk, she *always* makes super-obvious heart eyes at you."

"She does?" Mike asked, feeling hopeful.

"Yes! And you're always making them back. You two need a room or something..."

Mike blushed but didn't bother hiding it. A smile broke out on his face. "Do you guys really think I have a chance?"

"Dude, you don't see her hanging out with any *other* guys at school, do you?"

Mike nodded. *No, he didn't.* El may have been able to choose *any* guy she wanted at school to date, but he didn't see her even *talking* to anyone else.

He somehow smiled even wider. "Alright, then. I'll do it."

"There you go!" Will cheered.

"Round of applause." Dustin called out, mock clapping. "For the man who finally came to his senses."

Mike shook his head, his face turning red. He decided to embellish his friends. He stood up and waved his hand. "Thank you, thank you. I'll take any and all questions now."

Lucas made a fist, pretending to speak into a microphone. "How do you plan on asking her?"

Mike frowned. *How was he gonna ask her?* Did it matter? Did he need to wait for some *moment*? "Uhh..."

"Oh, god. He doesn't know." Dustin muttered.

"He's screwed..."

"What? He's not screwed..." Will weakly defended. "He just needs to figure out how he's gonna ask her."

Will looked at Mike expectantly, as if Mike was supposed to reveal his master plan.

"Uhh, I guess I could ask her while we study? She mentioned she wanted to go see a movie, maybe we could do that..."

"Wow, a *natural* romantic." Dustin sarcastically said.

"Wait, she *told* you she wanted to see a movie?"

"Uhh, yeah?" Mike asked, confused.

"That was an *obvious* hint that she wants to see the movie, with *you*!"

"Really?"

"Yes!"

"That could be good..." Will said. "They'll be alone."

"Yeah." Lucas said. "And *apparently* she thinks he's charming or something... So as long as he doesn't make a complete fool of himself-"

"Like usual." Dustin chirped.

"Then he should be fine."

"So, this plan revolves around Mike not making a fool of himself?" Dustin asked. "You could've just said *we're screwed*."

"*We're?*" Mike asked because *how* are his friends suddenly a part of his *potential* relationship with El.

"We are heavily invested in you and El." Will said as if reading his mind.

"Yeah, we're basically a part of your relationship, too."

Mike sighed, looking around. All progress on their video project has halted. They probably weren't going to get any more done, either. At least until next Tuesday.

"You guys are definitely *not* a part of me and El's relationship." Mike said, crossing his arms.

"Technically, you guys don't have a relationship." Dustin said, making Mike scowl.

"Not yet." Mike said.

"That's the spirit!" Will encouraged.

"Now, all we need to do is hope she doesn't painfully reject you." Lucas said, trying for a joke.

"You didn't need to add *painfully*."

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

Mike rifled through his freezer, looking for the tray of ice cubes. His wrist had swollen a little bit, but he could still mostly use it.

Just bruised, he thought, lucky it wasn't sprained or even worse, broken.

To be honest, Mike thought that his wrist *should've* broken. His entire body weight, *plus* the weight of his backpack had landed directly on his wrist. The whole thing sounded a lot worse than it was.

Either way, it still hurt trying to move his wrist in certain ways, so he resigned to looking for some ice to maybe help it settle down.

The area around his wrist had turned a deep shade of red. It was pretty noticeable against his pale complexion.

His mom was going to *kill* him when she noticed.

hey so this isn't my best work, not gonna lie. the quality of this chapter probably isn't as up to par as i'd like it to be but there are some fun moments. this chapter also contains some major turning points, like Mike being determined to ask El out. so we'll definitely see some fun in future chapters. speaking of future chapters, i went and made a story outline. and it seems like this story is going to be ten chapters long. which is coincidentally the personal mark that i wanted to hit for my first multi-chap. but these next couple chapters is when stuff starts to become *interesting*. so definitely look out for those. either way, all mistakes are mine (although i try and do a pretty decent job editing these for grammar and spelling mistakes) and i hope you all enjoyed.

ps. quick message.

i read every review, i try and reply to every review (i've been slacking lately, not gonna lie but i'll try and catch up.) i *see and notice* everyone who follows and favourites. And i *truly*

appreciate each and every one of you who does that. You readers mean the world to me and if that isn't made clear enough, i'd like to make it clearer. Thank you for sticking with this story (through the ups and downs) and thank you for sticking with me. It means the world.

wow that was cheesy, but i'm in a good mood so it's okay

6. chapter six

hello ! you all rock:)

Words w/out AN: 4500 +

Pairing(s): Mileven, Lumax

I own nothing.

the social system: chapter six

El arrived at school a bit later than she would've liked.

She glanced at a nearby clock and they were already halfway through first period. In her defence, she needed to get gas and buy some breakfast.

Also, she slept in (blame the alarm clock, not her.)

El considered walking into her first-period class late. Maybe she'd see Max sitting at her desk, bored out of her mind as usual. But she'd probably more than likely get detention.

The idea of skipping all together seemed like a much more suitable idea.

So instead of heading to her first-period class when she walked through the doors of the school, she decided to check on Mike and see how he was doing during his spare.

El headed for the library for the third time in the past few days, already becoming more familiar with the large room.

She noticed Mike sitting in the same spot he sat in on Wednesday. He didn't notice her.

She had off-handedly mentioned *maybe* showing up every now and then. She figured he wouldn't expect to see her here so soon.

El pulled out the chair beside him, kicking his leg when she sat down because apparently, *they do that now*. Which El found interesting. It had happened during English class earlier. El had kicked his leg, he reciprocated and suddenly during the rest of their English class, it had evolved into some different form of *footies*.

El wasn't complaining about it or anything.

He automatically kicked her back, before even looking up to her.

"Don't you have class?" He asked, carefully resting his pencil on the piece of paper in front of him.

"I do." She nodded, not saying anything more.

"Well? What are you doing here then?"

"I was late for class, so I'm just not gonna show up. Why? Do you not want to see me?" El teased.

Mike stuck his tongue out at her. "*Obviously*, that's not what I meant."

"Just making sure."

"You shouldn't be skipping class for me, though." Mike said, clicking his tongue, looking back down to his homework or whatever he was working on.

"Wow, you've got a big head." El said sarcastically. "Who said I'm skipping for you?"

"You mean you're *not* skipping for me?" Mike snorted. "Did you suddenly start coming to the library for *fun*?"

"Don't you go to the library for fun?" El retorted.

"I'll have you know..."

El raised her eyebrows.

"There's ample desk room?" Mike shrugged, becoming more serious. "It's calm here. I like it."

El nodded. "I like it too."

She snatched the textbook from in front of him, lifting the cover and taking a peek.

El gagged. She let the book fall out of her hands. "Ugh. Calculus."

"I'm going over some of the stuff from this week. We gotta spend more time together working on this."

Mike reached to grab the book and winced.

El frowned, squinting at his wrist. "Are you okay?"

Mike looked up at her, like a deer caught in headlights.

"What? Yes. I'm fine. Nothing happened." He quickly said.

"I never said anything happened..." El slowly said, confused.

Mike seemed nervous. He was scratching the back of his neck, El noticed, like he always did when he was anxious.

"Gimme your hand." El demanded.

"What? N-no."

Mike pulled his arm back, but El leaned forward, grabbing his elbow. She inspected his wrist, pulling up his sleeve.

"Quit struggling." El chastised, looking his wrist over.

It was a sickly shade of red and tender to the touch. "What happened?"

Mike wouldn't look her in the eyes.

"It's nothing." He half-heartedly said.

El glared, flicking his wrist. She felt *slightly* guilty doing it when she noticed him physically recoil. She didn't want to hurt him badly, or anything.

Mike tried tugging his arm back, but El locked it in place, tucking her hand into his and locking their fingers together. When she was satisfied that he couldn't pull his arm away, El brought it closer to her, looking the red mark up and down.

She ignored the burning feeling she had because *wow*, she was practically holding hands with Mike, instead choosing to focus on the mark on Mike's skin.

El didn't repeat her question but she gave him a pointed look.

"It was *Troy*." Mike admitted, slightly blushing. "He was saying some, uh, some *bad* things about my friends and shoved me against a locker when I got close to him."

"*Troy* is such a *dick*. I can't believe he would do this to you." El huffed. "Were you hiding this from me?"

"I don't know... Not really. It's just, kinda *embarrassing*. Y'know?"

El nodded. She lightly ran her fingers over the deep red mark. It turned white if she put enough pressure on it. Although, it probably hurt Mike more than he was letting on for her to keep pressing on the bruise.

She kept their fingers locked. "Is this hurting you?"

He shook his head. "It stings, but I, uh, I don't mind."

"When did this happen?" El asked.

"After English? I was heading to AV Club with Will."

El stroked his wrist, frowning. She didn't say anything but on the inside, she was *seething*. Mike looked so dejected admitting what happened between him and *Troy*.

After a moment she asked. "Has this kinda stuff been happening with *Troy* before?"

"No. Usually, it's just name-calling and stuff. This is the first time he's gotten physical..."

El pressed her foot against Mike's leg. "Are you *alright*?"

Mike rolled his eyes, smiling. "Yes. I'm fine."

He lightly kicked her in return, silently telling her that *yes, he was fine*.

El couldn't explain it, although if she tried she could probably think of a reason or two, but she felt slightly possessive. Mike was *hurt*, and there wasn't much she could do but watch.

She looked him in the eye, feeling slightly nervous but brave at the same time. She maintained eye contact, slowly lifting his hand closer to her face.

She softly pressed her lips to his wrist, watching as his eyes went wide, glancing between his wrist and El.

"There." El said. Her heart beat in her chest like crazy. "To heal your *boo-boo*."

Mike nodded. "W-what are you, my mom?" He croaked. His face turned as red as his wrist as he looked down to his textbook, smiling.

El smiled, allowing herself to blush when Mike wasn't looking.

aaaaAAAHhhhhh. Was all her mind could think about or process. *Did she really just do that?*

El was still holding his hand and Mike's foot was still pressed against her leg and the whole thing felt *domestic*.

El liked *domestic*.

Now would probably be a good time to ask him out, El reckoned.

Although she had just admitted to herself that she even had a crush on him just *yesterday*, or maybe it was two days ago. El couldn't keep count. The days seemed to be blurring together or her mind was slowly becoming mush. One of the two.

But either way, it seemed like she could've been rushing into things.

It's only been a *week*, after all. And the close-quarters contact with Mike wasn't helping her think.

But the way Mike was smiling to himself swept away the little doubts in her head. El decided to just enjoy the moment.

The two were quiet until Mike spoke up. "I think my friends are gonna do something stupid."

That caught El's attention. "To Troy? For like, revenge?"

"No. Although they did mention egging his house..." Mike rambled. "I think more to do with *you*."

"*Me?*"

"Yeah, *you*. I don't know... We were talking about you during AV Club and Dustin had this *look* on his face. Like he was up to something. I just have a weird feeling about it."

El's eyebrows shot up. She didn't care at all about what Dustin was doing. "You guys were talking about *me* during AV Club?"

Mike blanched, whipping his head to look at her and El smirked. He furiously shook his head. "No. Well, uh, yes. But like, in a totally *not* weird way or anything."

"Well, in what way then?" El questioned, inwardly laughing at all of his squirming. *They were talking about her.*

"Well, it was *barely* even about you... *Barely*." Mike repeated.

"Well go on." El gestured.

"Uh..." Mike cringed. "We were talking about... if Max was single?"

"You want to know... if *Max* is single?" El glared at him, briefly looking to their *interconnected* hands. She pulled her hand away and crossed her arms. She could already feel the warmth leaving.

"But it was for Lucas." Mike quickly said, waving his good arm. "Lucas totally has a crush on her and he wanted to know if she was single.

At least, I *think* he has a crush on her."

"Obviously he does." El said, shaking her head, smiling that this was for *Lucas*, and no one else. "They aren't being very subtle around each other."

"Yeah." Mike laughed. "It's super noticeable. They should just date already."

El agreed. "Instead of nervously skitting around each other, they should just ask each other out."

Mike laughed, knocking her feet under the table, making El blush once more. His smile was illuminating. "Maybe we'll set them up, who knows?"

El nodded, barely paying attention to the words coming from his pink lips. She watched them with increasing interest.

El felt like there was some sort of irony there, about friends who liked each other. But right now, she was too distracted.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

El walked to Calculus with Mike, just like she had on Wednesday. Side by side, they talked. Occasionally their arms brushed against each other and El wasn't even sure how she was supposed to react anymore.

Usually, if their arms brushed against each other while walking, El would turn a deep shade of crimson while Mike became a blubbering mess.

Now, El's blush would be much more manageable, (although still very prominent) and Mike only stumbled over a *couple* words before recomposing himself.

Sometimes El bumped his arms on purpose. She liked to watch him squirm, it was cute.

They both stopped outside of their math class. Mike stepped to the side, allowing her to go through before him.

"Jeez, what a gentleman." El joked.

Mike bowed. "M'lady."

They walked to their desks and Max gagged at her. "Gosh, you guys are even more disgusting today."

"What?" El whispered, looking back to make sure Mike couldn't hear them. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Dude. I *watched* you guys outside of the door." Max said.

"We were just joking around." El defended.

"Still!"

"Whatever." El said. "I have some *news* for you, though."

Max raised an eyebrow. "Like what?"

El leaned in. "Lucas asked if you had a boyfriend."

Max raised her eyebrows in surprise. "He asked *you* that?"

"No. He asked Mike, but Mike told me about it."

Max slowly nodded. "Interesting..."

"I feel like I probably shouldn't have told you that." Mike said, behind them. He had scooted his chair closer to El's desk.

El and Max turned their heads towards him. She instinctively kicked the back of his chair.

"Should I have not said anything?" El asked frowning. She didn't want to break his trust or anything.

Mike waved her off. "I don't care. I'm pretty sure Max knew about his *painfully* obvious crush on her."

"Wait." Max said. "Are you kidding me right now?"

"No, I'm pretty sure he has a massive crush on you." Mike replied.

"No, I meant about painfully obvious crushes." Max said, not so subtly looking between Mike and El.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." El crossed her arms. "Oh look, class is starting. We should all turn around and stop speaking."

Max glared at her and El easily returned one of her own.

"Okay then...?" Mike said, confused, before turning to face the front of the class.

When Mike turned around, El took it as an opportunity to smack Max.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

So it turned out, the *something stupid* that Mike's friends were going to do was sit with her at lunch.

Which on its own, seemed pretty innocent and not at all like a stupid idea, so El had no idea what Mike was on about.

They just showed up as she and Max were eating. Max had looked up, her eyes wide and El followed her gaze. She saw Dustin confidently leading Mike and his friends over to her table.

Mike shrugged at her as they walked closer, while she noticed Will and Lucas cautiously look around the cafeteria. None of them seemed to be as confident as Dustin, though. Who effortlessly strolled through the cafeteria, head held high.

Although, if anything, what levels of confidence were you supposed to have when walking through a cafeteria?

Mike had said this kind of thing was a big deal, though. He had told her that they've never eaten in the cafeteria since ninth grade, but

apparently, today they decided to break their traditions.

Their entrance had caused a few heads to turn, as it had a couple days ago, which El frowned at. It's not like they were zoo animals or anything.

"You nerds decide to try the cafeteria food?" Max said, when they got close enough.

El smacked her arm.

"Chill dude, I'm joking."

"I'll have you know." Lucas said. "That we *have* tried the cafeteria food."

"It was terrible." Will piped in.

El looked at Mike, who just shrugged again.

"I thought it was okay..." He pouted, crossing his arms.

"Well, you're wrong." Dustin said, stepping forward and taking a seat at their table.

Will hesitated for a moment. "Are these seats taken?"

"Yes." Dustin said. "By *us*."

"No, they're free." El gestured.

"Thank you." Will nodded.

He took a seat beside Dustin.

Mike was awkwardly standing to the side, his hands in his pockets. El gestured for Mike to sit in the open seat beside her and he seemed to relax a bit.

El looked at Lucas, who had quickly snagged the open seat beside Max.

Max didn't seem to have any objections, muttering a quick *nerd* and

punching him lightly on the shoulder.

"So what brings you folks to this table in the cafeteria on this beautiful autumn day?" El asked the four new faces sitting at the table.

"We're having lunch." Mike deadpanned, slightly smiling.

El kicked his leg underneath the table. "Any *real* answers?"

"Should we need a reason to hang out with our friends?" Dustin said, as if he was some sort of philosopher.

"Wise words." Lucas nodded.

"From a wise man." Dustin finished.

"I wouldn't say *that* wise..." Max chirped, causing Lucas to laugh.

Dustin said something in response, probably a complaint, but El didn't really pay him any attention.

She leaned closer to Mike and whispered. "So what are you guys *actually* doing here?"

El was curious. She didn't mind having Mike and his friends here to have lunch. If anything, she wanted them to eat lunch with her and Max. It could help Lucas and Max get together... But it also gave El a chance to get to know Mike's friends better.

"Do you not *want* us here?" Mike mocked, referencing when she had said the same thing to *him* during his spare earlier on.

She elbowed his side. "What do *you* think?"

"I think you're secretly *thrilled* to see us." Mike said, his voice low. He rolled his eyes and El's stomach did a flip.

"Something like that." El blushed. "Seriously, though."

"It's all a part of that feeling I had earlier." Mike said. "It turns out Dustin's *scheme* was to have lunch with you guys."

"Why?"

"I don't know, so he can be more popular? It's stupid."

"I think it's cute." El genuinely said.

Mike's eyes widened. "In that case, can we hang out more? I would love to be popular."

"Wow, *funny*." El deadpanned.

Mike laughed. "Well, I try."

"Yeah, I think I've told you this before but he seems to think that if he hangs out with *popular kids*, then he'll be more popular." Mike said. "If anything it'll probably make you guys *less* popular."

"Well, it's a good thing I don't care about how *popular* I am." El said.

"Right, because we're just so *hipster*."

El laughed. "Being different is cool."

"Tell Dustin that."

"What?" Dustin said from across the table. "Did you guys say my name?"

El looked up at Dustin in shock. Mike's mouth was gaping.

"Uh... No?" El said, looking at Mike.

"No." He confirmed, nodding his head. "We did not say your name."

"Right..." Dustin said. He seemed to glare at Mike, but looked away, back to the conversation he was having with Will.

Mike slowly turned back to look at El, whose eyes were wide.

They were silent for a moment before a small giggle escaped from El's lips. Soon Mike was laughing too, *hard*.

El had started fully laughing. She could barely catch her breath and

Mike was pretty much the same.

It wasn't even *that* funny, but that didn't stop El from laughing. She was leaning against Mike, using his body as support as her body was racked with laughter.

Their friends around the table were probably staring at them. The whole *cafeteria* was probably staring at them, but El couldn't care less.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

El showed up to English and Mike was sitting in their spot. He was talking with their teacher, Mr. Jacobs.

El walked over and took her seat.

"Ah, great. You're here." Mr. Jacobs said. "I have your books."

He brandished two sets of *King Lear* from the desk behind him.

"I was just explaining to Mike, here, that you need to take care of these copies of the books. It'd be a shame if the newest copies here get ruined. Okay?"

El nodded, looking at Mike. "Not a problem."

"Great. Thanks." Mr. Jacobs said. He handed them each their copy of *King Lear* before walking away.

El flipped her book over, inspecting it. Mike did the same. The cover was shiny. The pages weren't ripped and it smelled *new*. Overall, it was probably a *much* better version of *King Lear* than the one that they shared.

But El couldn't help but think that the old one was still better.

"These are..." Mike started, not finishing his sentence.

"New." El finished. "They are very new."

Mike shook his head in agreement. "So... Are we supposed to start reading, now?"

"I think so."

"Cool." Mike nodded his head. "Cool, cool, cool. I'm just gonna..."

He held the new book in his hand and waved it in the direction of his bag. Mike unzipped his backpack and shoved the book in.

El just shook her head and laughed. "That was maybe the most *awkward* event that I've ever witnessed."

"What was I supposed to do?" Mike exclaimed. "You're just staring at me, making me feel all pressured and stuff. And I don't know how to say I genuinely *like* reading with you without making it get all *weird*."

"Aw," El's eyes softened. She nudged him under the table with her leg. "I like reading with you, too. And not just because you could seriously injure your back if your backpack gets too heavy."

Mike's face was tinged red, but a small smile appeared. "Yes, *of course*. Serious injury could happen."

El opened up *their* copy of *King Lear*, the original one, rips and all, and moved it so Mike could get a better view. She pressed her arm against his, although she figured he could probably see the words without her doing that.

When their arms touched, Mike jerked his arm away, like he was shocked.

El looked at him, trying not to let her frown show.

He meekly ducked his head and leaned in to read the book, slowly moving his arm back to where it was.

El didn't bother hiding her grin.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

At the end of the day, El met up with Max.

El was giving her a ride to her house so they could hang out like they always do.

She saw the familiar head of red hair bounding down the empty hallway.

"Hey loser." Max called out.

"Talking to yourself is weird." El retorted.

Max stuck her tongue out, making El laugh.

"You ready?" El asked.

"Of course I'm ready. Let's go."

El led them to her car in the parking lot, fishing her keys out to unlock the doors.

"So, what are we gonna do this weekend?" Max asked.

"I don't know. The usual?" El suggested. "Watch a movie, eat food, stuff like that."

"Sounds good. I like the usual. Maybe we could talk about your *massive* crush on Mike." Max innocently said. "And don't even *try* to deny it."

El started the car, pulling out of her parking spot.

"Max?" El said, her voice as thick and dramatic as she could make it. "There's something I need to admit to you."

"What could it possibly be?"

"I have a crush on Mike Wheeler." El said, gasping. She couldn't maintain her composure and started laughing.

Max joined in. "The *horror*."

"Well, we can talk about my crush as long as we talk about *yours*." El

proposed.

Max huffed. "Sounds like a deal, then."

Max bent forward to turn on the radio, tuning it to whatever pop station was playing whatever popular song.

They spent the rest of the car ride ridiculously singing along to whatever song played.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

"Hello, Maxine." Hop said as he entered the front door.

El and Max were sitting in the living room, watching a movie. It was mainly just background noise as they talked about whatever was on their minds.

Max turned her head to the new noise. "Hey, Hop. What's up?"

"Not much, long day at work."

"Excuse me." El interrupted. "You aren't even going to say *hi* to your own child first? What kind of betrayal is this?"

"Hello, dear daughter of mine. How are you?"

"I'm good." El said, turning back to the tv now that she had gotten what she wanted. "We ran out of Eggos."

"Well, you're lucky I noticed and brought some home." Hopper held up a grocery bag from beside him. El could see the familiar yellow box poking out from the top.

El rushed up and took the bag from his hand, giving him a quick side hug. "You truly are the *best* dad."

Hop smiled to himself, moving into the kitchen with El. Max jumped up from the couch, following the two of them.

"I, for one, am *delighted* that you decided to bring home food for us." Max said. She took the box of pizza in Hopper's other hand and set it on the kitchen countertop.

"Sometimes I think you're only here to steal our food." Hopper said.

"And sometimes you're right." She agreed, waving to him with a piece of pizza in her hand.

"So, any big plans for the weekend?" Hop asked them.

El looked at Max. "Not really. Might need to meet up with Mike so he can continue tutoring me in Calculus."

Max took a bite of the pizza. "Ha! *Tutoring* won't be the only thing you two are doing."

El's jaw dropped. She whipped her head in Max's direction and tried to give her a seething glare.

"Mike, huh?" Her father said. "Is that the name of the guy who gave you his shirt?"

"You still have it?" Max said, astounded.

El blushed. "I haven't had a chance to give it back to him."

"She wears it to bed." Hopper piped in, laughing.

El's blush deepened and Max cackled like a maniac. "This is *amazing*."

"It was only a *couple* times..." El tried to defend.

"*More* than once? This is too good." Max had finished her first piece of pizza and was moving on to number two.

"Shut up." El said, crossing her arms.

"Does this *Mike* guy, and I need to have a little chat?" Hopper said, putting on his *police voice*.

"Oh, god *no*." El uttered.

Hopper looked at Max, raising his eyebrows in question.

"Nah, you're fine." Max said. "He tutors her in Calculus. He's a nerd. He couldn't hurt her if he tried."

"Still..." Hopper said.

"I can introduce you." El said, regretting it immediately. She did not want her father in the same *room* as Mike. He'd probably get so nervous standing face to face with the chief of police.

"And we aren't even *dating*." El said.

"Sure thing." Max said, disbelievingly.

"That's it. I'm going to my room." El said, grabbing the pizza box.
"And I'm taking *this*."

"Where the pizza goes, I follow." Max said automatically following El.

"Save me a couple pieces!" Hopper called out to them.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

"Is that Mike's shirt neatly folded on the corner of your bed?" Max asked, pointing to the shirt.

"No?"

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

Max had left earlier that morning, so El was left alone on Saturday, as her dad was out at work.

She sat crossed-legged on her bed, staring at her phone, debating whether or not she should text Mike. She had his number, after all.

Maybe she could phone him? El always preferred to call people, instead of texting, because she liked to hear people's voices.

Although, she wasn't against texting. She texted Max all the time. And when Hopper didn't have enough time to call, he would always send her a quick text.

She picked up her phone, typing Mike's number in. She hovered over the call button. Maybe Mike was a texting kind of guy?

El sighed.

Maybe she was overthinking this? She was definitely overthinking this.

She pressed the call button and set it to the loudspeaker.

El anxiously waited as she heard the dial tone. Would he even pick up?

"Hello?" She heard from her phone.

"Hey." El replied. "It's El."

"I know it's you." Mike deadpanned. "I have your number saved."

"Oh, right."

"So, what's up?" He asked.

"Uh, I'm free right now- like, I'm not doing anything. So, I was wondering if you wanted to come over to my house, or something."

"Uh..."

"For tutoring!" El amended. "For tutoring. Y'know... If you're free."

"Yeah! I'm free." Mike said. "Uh, I'm hanging with my friends later tonight. I have a surprise campaign for them that we're gonna do in Dungeons and Dragons. But I can hang out for a bit now."

"Cool." El smiled, hearing him talk about the stuff he liked made her smile, for some reason. "Very cool."

"So, what else is up?" Mike asked.

"Not much. Just... chilling." El mentally cringed. That was so interesting and cool.

"You know kids our age usually *text*, right?"

"Oh. Sorry. I didn't realize you didn't like calling. I can text next time..."

"No, it's fine. I actually prefer calling people." Mike said. "Uh, I'll get ready to leave in a bit. Can you text me the address?"

"Yeah, sure." El nodded. "No problem. I'll see you here."

"Yeah. I'll see you there." El could hear the smile in his voice.

They hung up and El tossed her phone somewhere on her bed.

She sat back against her pillows, smiling. So, Mike liked calling people, too?

El couldn't help but wonder if it was for the same reason *she* liked calling people.

hello, here is another update. i wrote like 2.5k words tonight because i was running late with this chapter so, hopefully it is quality content, lol. not much to say because i am super tired, nut if you wanna leave a review, that'd be cool. maybe even drop a favourite? that'd be super cool. or if you *really* want to, check out my other fics? i would really appreciate that. anyway, i try my hardest to edit these as best I can at four o clock in the morning, but all mistakes are mine and I hope you all enjoyed.

also i made a story outline and originally said it was only gonna be around 10 chapters, but it might be a bit longer. some of the scenes that i wanted to write for this chapter are too long, so i'll need to add it to the next chapter. which means i'll need to add next chapter's scenes to the one *after* that. and so on and so on. so if these scenes end up taking so long, then there is definitely going to be a couple extra chapters.

also also, this fic has now hit 100 pages long in the google doc.

that is crazy to me.

7. chapter seven

hello we out here with another chapter. posting early bc i felt like it. although i'm not sure if i'll be able to get the next chapter out on time because i'm busy next week. drop a review, if you want. that'd be cool

Words w/out AN: 4800 +

Pairing(s): Mileven, Lumax

I own nothing.

the social system: chapter seven

Mike was early and anxious.

He was standing outside of El's house, just like they had agreed on earlier. Mike packed a few things into his bag and left his house, heading to El's.

On the way there, he thought about what had just happened.

A *girl* called him under her own freewill. That on its own was kind of crazy. And the fact that it was *El* had his head spinning.

Although, Mike figured they were friends. And friends called each other...

Mike just didn't think it would happen so soon. He had gotten her phone number (after gathering quite a bit of courage) just *one* day earlier. And she was already calling him asking for him to come over.

Although, *technically*, she had said it was to study.

Which is why Mike had packed his textbooks and stuff, but still. He was going to her *house*.

Mike saw this as a step in the right direction.

He stood outside her door, holding his hand up prepared to knock.

Mike slowly breathed in, psyching himself up. *You can do this*, he thought. *You've knocked on doors before...*

He smacked his knuckles against the door, quickly recoiling when his wrist erupted in streaks of pain.

"Ahh." He groaned, clutching his wrist. "What the hell."

The dark red bruise from his encounter with Troy was still *clearly* evident on his wrist.

"Idiot..." He muttered, trying to calm his breathing. How could he forget his wrist was injured still?

The door in front of him swung open. He must have been a *weird* sight to El.

He was hunched over his wrist, clutching it as the pain slowly faded.

El noticed his grimace and frowned. "Are you okay?"

"Peachy." He muttered embarrassed El was seeing him like this.

Mike watched her reach out and tenderly grab his hand. He felt his arm loosen up and he let El pull it closer to her. She inspected his wrist like a nurse.

"You're an idiot." She muttered leading him inside. "Did you knock on the door with your *injured* wrist?"

Mike hummed, not wanting to admit the answer out loud. He followed El into her house, closing the door behind him. He looked around at everything he could as El walked him to... somewhere.

"Where are we going?" Mike asked.

"To the kitchen." She replied, gesturing in front of her. "To get you some ice."

The hallway was wider than her front door, so Mike stepped forward,

walking beside El.

El wasn't really leading him anywhere, now. Since, Mike could clearly see the kitchen in front of them, but that didn't stop El from still holding his hand. They continued forward, stopping in front of her fridge. She grabbed an ice tray from the freezer and set it on the counter.

Mike couldn't really find any words to say. So he just continued staring at her. He probably wouldn't get another opportunity to observe her without being labelled a creep.

She set his arm down on the counter beside the ice tray. He watched her turn around and effortlessly pluck a plastic bag from a package of them. She gracefully scooped up some ice, placing it in the bag and handing it to him.

Maybe he *was* a creep.

Because he just watched El simply grab a bag and put ice in it and words like *effortlessly* and *gracefully* was how he described it.

Mike shook his head, focusing on the relaxing chill of the bag of ice being pressed down onto his wrist. The cold seemed to be drowning out the initial pain and maybe that would help his thoughts to clear.

"I like your house." Mike said, since he still couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Thank you." El replied, eyeing his wrist. "How's your arm?"

Mike slowly rubbed his arm, taking the ice bag off. The ice cubes were already melting and the water had started to pool in a corner of the bag.

"I'm fine." Mike said, scratching the back of his neck with his good arm. "So..."

"So..?" El asked, leaning against the kitchen counter.

"Uh, what's up?" Mike cringed. Usually he was able to talk with El perfectly fine. He definitely blamed the fact that he was at her *house*,

instead of the library, where he was used to.

"Eloquent." El smirked. She turned away from him to put the ice tray back into the freezer.

"Um... Tutoring!" Mike exclaimed, before realizing that *nobody* is ever that excited for tutoring. "Uh, where do you want to study?"

"My room?" El asked innocently, turning back to look at him.

Mike's jaw dropped.

"Or we could do it in the living room? If that makes you more comfortable."

He shook his head. "What? No. Uh, your room is fine. Yeah. It's good."

El smiled. He *hated* how she made him tongue-tied and then *grinned* about it. She would be the death of him.

"Here, I'll show you my room. You can set your bag down there."

Mike nodded, following her down the hallway again, but entering one of the closed doors.

El stepped to the side, letting Mike walk through behind her. He stopped at the doorway, just looking around her room. It was modestly sized and fairly neutral-coloured.

"You getting a nice look?" El smirked.

"Uh, sorry." Mike said. "It's nice. I like your room."

"Thank you." El replied curtly.

Mike set his bag down, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Do you want anything to eat?" El asked. "I haven't eaten yet, so I'm gonna make some Eggos, probably."

"Uh," Mike thought for a moment. He hadn't eaten either, having immediately left home when El called him. "I could eat, yeah."

"Cool." El said, slipping out the door and heading in the direction of the kitchen.

"Um..." Mike said, although he was the only one in the room now. Should he follow her?

Gosh, he needed to seriously stop being so awkward.

"Are you coming?" El called out to him from down the hall.

"Right! Right." Mike said, jumping up and jogging to the kitchen.

Mike entered the kitchen, moving to the side as El opened the freezer door. She bent down and retrieved a package of frozen waffles.

"Toasted or microwaved?" She asked, not looking at him and reaching for a plate on the top shelf.

Mike watched her squirm, reaching on her tippy-toes for the plate. He laughed, a bit confused. Why were the plates on the top shelf if she couldn't reach them?

"What's the point..." Mike started, stepping beside El and grabbing the plate for her. "Of having dishes on the top shelf, if you can't reach them?"

"Usually I use paper plates," El shrugged, pointing to a package of them sitting on the counter. "But for guests, we can use *actual* dishes."

"Yeah but that still doesn't answer the question." Mike pointed out. "Eventually, you'll need to use a dish and hopping on the countertop to get them doesn't seem like a good plan."

"I need two dishes actually." El noted, looking at him expectedly. "And usually Hop is the one who does all of the cooking. So he puts everything where he likes it."

"I feel like I'm being used for my height." Mike grumbled, easily reaching for another plate.

"Well, you don't expect me to hop on the countertop, do you?" El mocked.

"It would be fun to watch..."

El stuck her tongue out at him. Mike frowned. He was *much* more mature than that, choosing to stick his tongue out *and* make a fart noise, too.

"Ew," El shrieked. "You just spat on me!"

"Not my fault you were within spitting distance."

El held up a frozen waffle like she was prepared to smack him with it.

"Oh no!" Mike said, backing away and holding his hands up in surrender. "Not a waffle! The horror..."

Mike tried to back up some more, but the fridge was in his way. El took a few steps forward. Somehow she managed to look menacing while holding the waffle. How she kept a straight face, Mike will never know.

"Hey, listen now..." Mike said, becoming more and more afraid of the waffle in her hand. "No need to use *weapons*, now."

El evilly smirked. She walked up to Mike and fisted the front of his shirt, pulling him closer to her.

She never said anything, only staring into his eyes. Mike found himself leaning forward, closing the distance between them slightly.

He stared at El and watched as her eyes flickered down to his lips, before returning to stare back at him. Mike's face started to heat up at their closeness.

"El..." He whispered. Before anything else could happen, El quickly took the frozen waffle in her hand and shoved it down the front of his shirt.

"Ahh!" Mike said, squirming from the coldness. The waffle danced around in his shirt. His skin was sensitive to the extreme temperature change.

He flailed around the kitchen, jerking his body every time he felt the breakfast food touch him. Eventually, it fell out of the bottom of his shirt, splattering on the ground.

He breathed heavily, glaring at El, who was leaning against the counter, apparently *dying* from laughing.

"Not funny." He muttered, crossing his arms, partly to look intimidating and partly to warm his chest back up.

"I don't know..." El said in between wheezes. "It was pretty funny from where I was standing."

Mike eyed the half-frozen waffle on the ground. "How would you feel..."

He scooped it up, moving closer to her. "... If I did it to you?"

"Ah!" El shrieked, pushing Mike away. "Do *not* put that waffle anywhere close to me. I swear to God..."

Mike glared at her, holding the waffle as intimidatingly as he could, before tossing it on the counter.

"Fine." He said curtly, crossing his arms and turning away from El.

"Awe..." El cried. "Did I hurt your feelings?"

"No..." Mike said, pretending to be sad. "Well... It just wasn't a very fun prank. I could've gotten hurt. I don't really appreciate it..."

"Boo-hoo."

"I think the only way I could feel better..." Mike said, turning to look at El. "Is if you *eat* the waffle."

"What?" El exclaimed. "You want me to *eat* the floor waffle?"

"It's only fair," Mike said, innocently shrugging.

"Nope. Nope, nope nope." El said, shaking her head and crossing her arms. "You are a guest in *my* house and I will *not* be eating *floor*

waffles."

"Fine." Mike said. "But when you come to my house, you are *screwed*."

"*When* I come to your house?" El asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Uh, Y'know... I-if you wanted to?" Mike stuttered.

"Relax!" El said, smacking his chest. She walked by him and picked up the floor waffle, disposing of it in the trash. "I'm sure it'd be great fun to go to your house. Play the dungeons game or whatever."

"Dungeons and Dragons." Mike corrected, wondering if she was being serious.

"Yes, Dungeons and Dragons." El said. "Hang out, watch movies. Like all your *friends* do."

She turned to him with a smile and something told Mike that yes, she was being serious. She seemed genuinely interested in playing his nerdy game with him.

"But I still need to know..." El said, grabbing a few more waffles from behind him.

Mike eyed them warily but was relieved as he watched them het set on a plate.

"Do you want your Eggos toasted or microwaved?"

"Toasted, obviously." Mike said, tilting his head. "What kind of monster microwaves them?"

"Hey!" El cried. "I'll have you know that microwaving them provides you with a completely different and exciting way of eating your waffles."

She put four waffles into the toaster. Then she placed the package of waffles back into the freezer.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know we had a waffle *expert* over here." Mike said, raising his hands up. "And I don't see *you* putting your waffles in the

microwave."

El blushed, slyly smiling. "Well, I happen to prefer the toaster method. But the microwave isn't bad!"

"Maybe if you have a microwaved floor waffle, it'll taste better than the toasted ones." Mike suggested.

El raised an eyebrow, curving her lips. "Maybe it will. You should try it out for me."

"I'll eat it, if you eat it." Mike challenged. He didn't know where he was going with this but he'd do anything to see that smile on El's face.

"Really?" El said. She seemed to ponder over this for a moment. She stepped closer to Mike and tapped her finger on her chin. "Interesting..."

She was maybe a foot away from him, and Mike was leaning back against the counter top. If he leaned forward the distance in between them would close fairly fast.

"Well, if we were to do this... For science, of course." El said, seemingly leaning closer to him.

Mike didn't lean away, but he became hyper aware of all of his movements.

"We would need another floor waffle." El continued.

"And we'd also need to shove it down someone's shirt." Mike piped in. "And we're *definitely* not doing mine again."

"What, so you want *me* to sacrifice my comfort?" El asked, not sounding too against the idea. "If we did this, I'd need some way to warm up... After all, I wouldn't want a *frozen* waffle held up against my stomach, or something."

She eyed him and Mike silently gasped.

"Body heat could warm you up." Mike whispered.

"Yeah?" El asked, although it seemed like she had already thought of that. "So what, we could *hug* or something to warm me up?"

If Mike was thinking properly, he'd probably realize that *no*, two people don't need to hug if one of the people is cold. Realistically, the Eggos would thaw out from the person's body temperature before the person became *too* cold.

But the way that El suggested the idea, like it was some unthought of *genius* idea, that Mike found himself nodding along with her.

"Yeah, hugging could work." Mike nodded. "Maybe even-"

He was cut off by the *ding* of the toaster. The Eggos shot up, announcing that they were ready to be eaten.

"I guess we'll just have to put a hold on this conversation..." El smirked. She grabbed a container of maple syrup from one of the cabinets and Mike just blinked, silently wondering what just happened and what *could've* happened.

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Mike walked into her room after finishing the Eggos. He turned around to face El, who was following him.

Mike was still flustered, because *yes*, he was pretty sure him and El were flirting in the kitchen. Mike wasn't the best at spotting signals, but there were at least a *couple* moments where she made his breath hitch and Mike found himself wanting to be *closer* to her.

They ate the Eggos in silence, carefully eyeing each other. Every time El looked at him, there was *something* in her eyes. An expression that seemed like hunger but made no sense since she was in the middle of eating.

Mike found himself eating faster, anyway.

But as Mike entered the room, he wasn't really paying attention and apparently neither was El, since a moment later, El toppled into him,

sending them both crashing onto the bed.

Mike looked down to see El lying on top of him, his good hand holding her arm. Mike couldn't think to do anything next as he realized how *close* they were. They were both lying on her bed, El *on top* of Mike and it would be pretty *scandalous* if someone walked in on both of them.

Luckily they were alone.

He was staring at El's eyes as she hovered over him on her bed. Their faces were impossibly close and if their positions were reversed, Mike wasn't sure he would be able to hold himself up, since one of his arms was practically useless.

Something about being alone with El in her *room*, made Mike freeze.

Her hair sprawled around her face, some tips tickled the side of his face. Mike had half a mind to brush it behind her ear.

He wasn't sure if he could feel her heartbeat from how close they were or if his was just beating enough for the both of them. Mike's mind was all jittery. If he was being awkward before, it was nothing compared to now.

Mike couldn't physically move away either, since El's body was pinning him down, but it didn't seem like El was trying to go anywhere.

Her tongue quickly licked her lips and Mike found himself watching the movement, staring at her slightly parted lips. He tore his gaze away from her inviting lips, looking back into her eyes.

Mike wasn't an expert or anything, but he's pretty sure her eyes were dilated.

Mike brought his good arm up and lightly rested it on El's back, supporting her but not providing any resistance if she wanted to get up. He didn't know what he was doing, but it seemed right because the feeling of El's body pressed up against him made his heart beat even faster.

The way El was staring at him made Mike enamoured. Her undivided attention was solely on *him*. He wanted to close the gap between them. To let their lips press against each other.

Thankfully, El took the initiative. At some point, Mike's body had frozen in place and he wouldn't have been able to move it if he tried.

"Fuck it..." El muttered, her breath rolled over Mike's lips.

He watched as she leaned forward and pressed her lips against his. Mike closed his eyes instinctively, noticing the sweet taste of maple syrup on her lips.

He decided to bring his hand up to her hair, feeling how soft it was and moving it out of the way from her face.

Her lips were soft and his heart was beating and there wasn't much he could focus on except *El*. He kissed her back, running his hand deeper through her hair.

She moved her arms around him, resting one just under his shirt. The skin on skin contact burned. He silently wondered where the ice pack was.

He worked his lips against hers to the point where he could feel them start to swell, only pulling back for air as his lungs started to burn.

Wow. Wow wow wow. Mike's mind was buzzing and all awkwardness he felt earlier was replaced with a feeling of happiness.

"Um..." Mike charmingly said. "That just happened."

El nodded, her face flushed with heat. Mike was sure he probably looked the same. "You're right. That did just happen."

"Can it happen again?" Mike asked, feeling tons more confident.

El smiled, leaning forward. She lightly touched her lips to his, mumbling, "Yeah... Maybe it could."

Mike craned his neck forward, so they were properly kissing.

This kiss was softer, and slower. More intimate, if anything.

Mike felt brave so he let his hand go lower, resting on the curve of her hip. El responded, sitting up so she was straddling him. Mike gasped.

She started giggling, breaking away from their kiss before leaning down to plant her lips on his cheek.

Mike smiled, his face mere centimetres away from El's. He clicked his tongue. "You know, I remember when we were first making plans to tutor you. I said something about how all of my friends usually come over to my house..."

"Mhmm?" El said. She was still smiling, staring into his eyes. It didn't seem to calm his beating heart.

"I accidentally made it seem like I was inviting you to my house." Mike continued on. "You said something like, *for a tutoring session, we should stick to the library...*"

"Did I say something like that?" El pondered, although Mike figured she already knew the answer to that question.

"You *did*." He confirmed anyway. "Yet, *here* we are... Studying in your room."

"Really? Did it seem like we were just *studying*?" El coyly asked. Mike knew she knew the answer to that question. "Does this *seem* like a tutoring session?"

"It's definitely *some* kind of session..." Mike said, leaning in as close as he possibly could, trying to tease her as his breath brushed over her lips. Even going as far as grazing a hand up her thigh.

Mike's adrenaline was at an all-time high, right now. He felt like he could do *anything*.

He felt El's chest exhale deeply. She laughed and the closeness of their bodies meant he could feel it as she shook. "In my defence, when I first called you to come over I was hoping *studying* wasn't the only thing we would do."

"So your plan was to invite me into your house under the guise of tutoring and then seduce me?"

"Well, maybe we could've gotten more *actual* studying done." El laughed. "Seriously though, I thought we were just gonna hang out, maybe watch a movie. I didn't think it would get so... *Heated*."

"Ah, that's great to know." Mike said. "I'm glad I'm not being used so you can get good grades. I was hoping you wouldn't ditch our friendship as soon as you started passing your classes again."

El rubbed her arm up his back. "I *definitely* would never do that."

Mike hummed. He slowly pressed his lips against El's. Which wasn't hard to do, considering they were still so close to each other.

El purred and Mike relished in how *soft* her lips were. El moved a hand up into his hair, combing through it.

He still couldn't believe this was happening. He still couldn't believe they were doing *this*.

El pulled away smiling. She moved her hand from his hair to his chest. "Well, I'm glad-"

Mike heard a car door slam outside and El's eyes went wide. Her hand that was slowly stroking his chest stopped.

"What time is it?" She asked, worried.

"Uh," Mike looked at the clock on her nightstand. "Four. Why?"

"My dad's home."

"Oh." *Oh.* Mike's eyebrows shot up. "Like your *police officer* father?"

"Yes." El smiled but she didn't seem happy. She jumped up off the bed.

"Um... Fix *this*." She gestured to the bed they were lying on.

"This?"

"The bed, the blankets, the books. If you could pretend you were reading the textbook, that'd be great." El said, quickly throwing her *disheveled* hair into a ponytail. "Also if you could make it seem like we *weren't* just making out, that'd be nice. Just like, *stop* blushing. Yeah, just make it so your face isn't red."

"Okay..." Mike nodded looking around him, grabbing the textbook and sitting cross-legged. He straightened a pillow or two and smoothed out the blanket. "Should I move to the living room?"

"No time." El said halfway out the bedroom door.

Mike heard the front door open.

"What are you going to do?" He asked her.

"I'm going to convince my dad that I don't even know what *kissing* is."

"Hello! How was work?" He heard El faintly say as she walked closer to presumably her *father*.

Mike ran a hand through his hair, hoping it was slightly tamed. Although El's hands liked to explore and he figured she'd left his hair in less than pristine condition.

He sighed and glanced towards the window. Was it too late to escape? He *knew* they should've just studied in a library. No police chiefs to interrupt them.

Although if they went to a library they might've *actually* studied and that option was *terrible* compared to what they decided to do instead.

The door to El's room opened and he saw Chief Hopper poke his head in. Mike stood up, debating on whether he should kneel and beg for forgiveness or go for a handshake.

Hopper walked into the room and Mike saw El squeeze in behind him.

"Uh, hello, sir." Mike said, making sure his voice didn't crack. He held a hand out.

He watched anxiously as Hopper inspected the hand thrusted in front of him.

Hopper squinted at it. "Mike, right?"

"Yes." Mike said, nodding, still awkwardly holding his hand out. Should he just put it down?

Before he could decide what to do, another spike of plain flared up his arm as the chief shook his hand.

Mike winced, unsure if the shriek was only in his mind, or if he said it out loud, too. *Idiot...* He thought. Why did he keep using his *injured* arm to do stuff? He could barely bend his wrist, why would it be a good idea to shake someone's hand?

And it's not like the chief had the gentlest of handshakes. Hopper was in complete control of the handshake, shaking them up and down. Mike's hands were just along for the ride.

"And you were *just* studying?" Hopper said releasing Mike's hand and turning to look at El.

She nodded. "Yep. Of course."

Hopper looked back at Mike, glaring at him, *inspecting* him. "No you weren't."

"Uh..." El said.

"Don't be *stupid*, kid." Hop said, locking eyes with El. And instead of looking worried, like one might when they were just caught *making out* with some guy by their father, she just nodded resolutely.

Apparently, that phrase held a lot of weight in this household because Hopper just nodded back at her, like they had made a silent agreement. There wasn't any yelling or anything like that and the pain in Mike's wrist was temporarily forgotten.

"Nice meeting you Mike." Hop said, turning to leave. "I'm gonna get some food. You guys want anything?"

"We ate." El answered. Mike was still silent, trying to figure out what just happened.

"I'll be in the living room, then." He said. "Keep the door open a few inches."

Hopper looked at Mike, who just nodded, still confused. He walked out and Mike turned to El.

"Uh." Mike said. "What just happened?"

"You just met my dad." El answered.

"Does he know that we were just...?" *Making out*, he mouthed.

El nodded. "Yep. But he's also the *best* dad in the world, so it's okay."

"Uh..."

"Honestly, that went really good." El continued on. "He likes you, too."

"Great?" Mike said, the pain in his arm suddenly reintroducing itself.

He winced and stopped clenching it. "I really gotta stop using this arm to do stuff..."

El looked down at his injured arm, the bruise was as dark and red as it had been yesterday.

She shook her head, reaching to pick up his arm. She held it up to her face and gently kissed it, like she had yesterday. This time she lingered. Her lips held against his wrist as her eyes bored into his. It was *much* more intimate and Mike liked it better this way.

Mike shook his head, deciding to clear all thoughts of El's dad from his head. He found something much better to focus on.

He cleared his throat. "Y'know... My lips are bruised too, I think. They're just in *so* much pain... Do you think you could...?"

El shook her head, smiling. She quickly pressed her lips against his. It

was chaste and Mike wanted something more. He pouted.

"Nuh-uh." El shook her head, grabbing a textbook and sitting on her bed. "You have that thing with your friends soon and we still have some studying to do. Also, my dad is *right there*."

Mike sighed. She was right. "Y'know, you could come with me to watch the campaign?"

El raised her eyebrows and Mike mentally cringed. *Wow*, that was nerdy. There wasn't really a *cool* way to invite a girl to a Dungeons and Dragons campaign...

"Like, you could bring Max and we could all hang out in my basement as we play. I don't have characters for you guys and I didn't write you into the campaign but you could still watch it."

"I think Max is free tonight..." El tilted her head, debating it. "And I wouldn't mind learning more about this game you like..."

Mike grinned, sitting beside her on the bed and picking up a textbook. "Yeah?"

El nodded, smiling. "Yeah."

hello here is another chapter. they kissed. they finally kissed and maybe it's been too long or maybe it hasn't been long enough but i feel like this scene, in general, came out pretty good and i'm proud of this chapter. although i didn't get as much progress done plot-wise as i wanted to, so this fic is probably gonna be around 12-13 chapters long now, lol. whoops.

tell me what you think in a review. we're maybe a bit more than half-way done the fic and this fic already has the most reviews out of any fic i've posted so i think that's super cool. it shows me that the people who read this really like it (or at least like it enough to comment, lol)

next chapter will be about everyone hanging out in mike's basement, in case you were wondering. Either way, I try fairly hard to edit this but as always, all mistakes are mine and I hope

you all enjoyed!

8. chapter eight

hello, if you're still reading this, thank you!

Words w/out AN: 4591

Pairing(s): Mileven, Lumax

I own nothing.

the social system: chapter eight

El and Mike actually studied.

After *kissing* him, El didn't know how she had it in her. She figured she would be too busy, too *obsessed* with Mike, but she mustered up whatever strength she had left to study, considering her dad was just down the hall.

And considering she was never the *best* at studying in general, trying to settle down and do just that after what happened between her and Mike felt impossible.

After a gruelling *hour* of studying calculus, El felt like she was marginally better at factoring so she considered her efforts not wasted. Mike had to leave, saying he needed to clean up his basement to have everyone over. He offered to give her a ride to his house if she wanted to hang out while he cleaned up.

And as much as El wanted to go, she refused his offer saying Hopper would give her a ride. El needed some time to prepare for it. She still needed to do some more homework and call Max.

Wow.

She needed to call Max immediately and inform her of everything that had just happened. And also to invite her to Mike's thing, but still.

Mike had got up, stating he needed to leave. El had frowned but

helped him gather his books. He lingered at her door, out of sight from Hopper, before he placed a tender kiss on El's cheek.

El had blushed and had half a mind to pull him in for a proper kiss, but maybe she shouldn't rush into things. So, she let him exit her room. She walked him to her front door, watching as he gave another nervous handshake to her dad before getting in his car and driving away.

El wanted to immediately go to her room so she could call Max, but Hopper had motioned for El to come sit beside him on the couch.

"Hey, kid." He said when she sat down.

"Hey." El replied. "What's up?"

"Tell me about the Wheeler kid."

"He's nice." El said immediately. "Pretty funny and really smart. I like him."

"You know I'm asking because I care, right?" Hop said. He didn't seem angry or mad at El for having a guy over without asking him. El was thankful for that.

"Of course." El nodded, happy her dad seemed to like Mike. "He's a good guy."

"But if he hurts you at all, I swear I will not hesitate to lock him up." Hopper threatened, only half-joking.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sure you will." El laughed, standing up. "Oh, just so you know, I'm going over to his house later tonight."

Hopper raised an eyebrow. "Wasn't he just here?"

"Yeah, but now we're hanging out with all of his friends to play some board game or something. Max will be there, too." *Hopefully.*

Hopper shrugged. "Who's gonna be there?"

"Me, Mike, Max..." El said, listing the names and holding up a finger

for each one. "And Lucas, Will and Dustin."

"Will *Byers*?" Hop asked, although he probably didn't need to. There was only so many Will's in their small town.

El nodded. "I think so. You know him?"

"I went to high school with his mom." Hopper said, staring off.

El frowned. There was probably something deeper that he wasn't talking about, but El didn't pay too much attention. She needed to go and talk to Max.

"Well, I trust you." Hopper said, looking back to her. "Just be careful."

"Don't worry." El said. "Max'll be there to keep me out of trouble."

Hopper gruffly nodded, turning his attention back to the TV and El took that as her cue to go back to her room.

She closed the door and picked up her phone from on top of her nightstand. Quickly finding Max's contact and calling her.

El put the phone on speaker mode before tossing it onto her bed. She walked up and grabbed her English homework. Ever since she became partners with Mike in English, and consequently, friends with him. She had been making an actual effort to do their English homework. And since she was actually enjoying the book, now, it made it even easier to answer all of the questions.

She heard the phone's dial tone twice before Max picked up.

"What's up, loser?"

"You're free for the rest of the day, right?"

"Yes...?" Max said cautiously.

"Great." El said. "I need you to come with me tonight."

"What? Where?"

"To Mike's house."

"Mike's house?"

"Mike's house." El nodded, although Max couldn't see her nodding.

"And *why* would *we* be going to Mike's house?" Max asked in a suggestive voice.

"Because he invited us."

"Ah, and you need a wingman to help you suck some face."

"Ah, about that..."

"El Hopper. Tell me right this instant what you are on about."

"Mike came to my house today." El squealed, unable to contain her excitement anymore.

"Oh my god." Max said. "Why didn't you tell me about this sooner? What'd you do? Did anything happen?"

"Yes." El whispered a smile quickly growing on her face. "We kissed."

"Eleanor!" Max screamed. "Are you dating now? Was it good? Did he use too much tongue? Did *you* use too much tongue? My god El, I've told you *never use too much tongue*—"

"What? No!" El interrupted. "There was a perfect amount of tongue. Jeez."

"Okay, just making sure..."

"And yes." El giggled. "The kiss was good. Very good."

"Well, are you guys dating now, or what?"

"Uh..." El thought. Were they dating? "I don't know. My dad came home and we got interrupted. We never really had a chance to talk about it."

"He met your dad! Right as you guys were making out? That's hilarious. You need to tell me all about that."

"I will later..." El said, embarrassed.

"But you guys need to figure out what's happening between you two."

"I'll talk to him about it tonight, then. When *we're* at his house. You are coming, right?"

El heard Max sigh from her phone.

"Lucas will be there."

"Fine." Max said. "I guess I have time to go."

El huffed. "So, you wouldn't have time if Lucas *wasn't* going?"

"Uh, I'm going through a tunnel. *Crrrrssh*. I think- breaking up-
Crrrrsh. Pick me up on your way to Mike's!" Max said, promptly and obviously hanging up the phone.

El glared at the phone laying on her bed. Max was a real *nuisance* sometimes.

She turned back to her homework, deciding to complete whatever English she had left before getting ready to meet Mike. He had sent her a text with just his address in it and El had assumed she can show up whenever.

She might call him to make sure though, for clarification, of course. Nothing else.

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El waved a quick goodbye to her father, who yelled out something about a *curfew* as she closed the door.

She was wearing simple jeans and a t-shirt. She had applied a bit more make-up than she usually would, mostly to impress Mike, but also for herself.

She hopped into her car and drove to Max's house. El turned the

radio on to make the ride less silent.

She parked outside of her house and waited, knowing that Max would come out.

El was right, as Max opened her front door and walked over to her car.

"So?" Max said as she opened the car door.

"So, what?"

"Tell me about the kiss!" Max said, as if that was the *first* thing El should've thought of when Max said so.

"It was good." El said with a blush. It was easier to talk to Max over the phone about this stuff. Face to face made El more anxious.

"Oh my god." Max complained. "You said that over the phone, too."

"Well, I don't know how to describe it!" El shouted. "It made me feel all warm inside..."

"That is absolutely adorable. You two are definitely gonna get married."

"Shut up. You asked."

"I'm starting to wish I didn't." Max laughed. "The amount of *gush* in my heart is killing me. I have a reputation to protect."

"Let in the love."

"It's also reminding me that I am *incredibly* single."

"Well, Lucas is going to be there tonight. Maybe you'll get *lucky*."

Max raised her eyebrow at her. "Let's just hurry up and get there."

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El knocked on the door of what was hopefully Mike's house.

All of the houses in the cul-de-sac looked the same and the house numbers were surprisingly hard to find.

El had almost walked up and knocked on the wrong house, before Max smacked her arm and pointed to the mailbox.

The Johnson's was scrawled on the side in a cursive font.

"Mike's last name isn't *Johnson*, is it?"

El shook her head. "We are definitely at the wrong house."

Moving on to what was hopefully Mike's house, El waited alone on the porch. Max opted to wait inside the car. Max said it was so she could sit and laugh as El knocked on the door of the *wrong* house again.

"Technically," El said. "I didn't knock on the door of that first house. I almost knocked on it."

Luckily, it was Mike who opened the door. He smiled at her and El shyly returned one of her own.

"Hey..." He breathed, standing in front of her.

"Hi." El tucked a curl behind her ear. Mike stared at her and El was content with gazing back.

"Can we talk alone?" El asked. "About, uh... What happened earlier? About us."

Mike nodded. "Yeah. My friends are already inside, though..."

"Oh," El said. "Maybe we can get a moment after?"

"They're staying the night." Mike said. He blushed and cleared his throat. "Are you, uh... Are you s-staying the night?"

El's eyes went wide with shock.

"Because you can if you want..." Mike rushed out. He rambled, "My

mom wouldn't mind. She never goes downstairs when my friends are over anyway, so I doubt she'd even find out. She's not even home, actually. She's out with my dad at some place. And there's like a couch you could sleep on. All my other friends are staying over, too..."

El smiled. Mike looked so awkward, slightly blushing and avoiding eye contact. She *really* wanted to kiss him again.

"Mhmm." El purred, resting her hand on his upper arm, pulling him a bit closer.. "I really like you, Mike."

"Yeah? Me too." He cheekily grinned, leaning closer to her, whispering. "I really wanna kiss you again..."

And maybe she would have, but El suddenly remembered Max was there, too. She turned back to her car. Max was sitting in the passenger seat, staring at the two of them intently.

"Uh... Staying the night sounds fun." El said. "But my dad wants me back at a certain time. And I need to drive Max home."

"Yeah, you're probably right." Mike frowned and El mentally cringed. From his point of view, it looked like she had just rejected him. "How's Max getting here? Do I need to give her my address, or something?"

"Um, actually..." El said hesitantly. "She's been watching us from my car. That's why I didn't want to kiss you just then..."

Mike's eyes widened and he whipped his head in the direction of where El was parked. El looked back to Max. Her fiery hair was extremely noticeable in the passenger seat. She watched as Max leaned over the console and honked the horn a couple times. Max opened the door and bounded over to the two.

"I feel weird." Mike said, as Max walked over to them.

"Did you not want me to tell Max about, uh..." El asked, unsure of what to define *them* as.

"No... I don't mind." Mike said, looking at El. "I immediately told all

my friends once I got home. Hopefully, that's alright."

El laughed. Slightly because she *also* rushed to tell her best friend about what happened. Slightly because of how brazenly he had admitted that.

"I don't mind." El confirmed. "What'd they say about it?"

"Lucas and Will were like *about time*." Mike said. "Dustin asked if we were, uh... dating?"

"That's actually what I wanted to talk to you abo-"

"Hello, lovebirds!" Max interrupted, holding her arms out and wrapping them around either person. Mike huffed, trying to wriggle out of her grasp. Max winked at El before walking through the door. She called back, "C'mon guys, we have a party to start."

"Well..." Mike started. "This will be... *interesting*."

El looked at Mike and sighed. She grabbed his arm and dragged him through the doorway. "We better make sure she doesn't cause any trouble."

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El sat beside Dustin on the couch in Mike's basement.

She looked around the basement and it *screamed* Mike at her. There were action figures scattered around shelves. Books lined the walls, ranging from literal thesauruses to *The in-depth Guide to Star Wars*.

A table was set up which had a mountain range on it. Dice were scattered on the table and small figurines were positioned every here and there. That must've been the game they were playing, *Dungeons and Dragons*.

Compared to her *boring* room, the basement actually described Mike. It showed his interests and hobbies. While her room was purely functional, not much in it was personalized. Maybe she would do a

bit of personalization. There were tons of photos of her and Max that she wouldn't mind putting up.

El looked back around the room, resting her eyes on her best friend.

Max and Lucas were talking and laughing. They seemed to be having a good time and El was happy for them. Max was blushing, her face redder than her hair and Lucas seemed to be playfully teasing her.

El blushed. Is that what everyone saw when she and Mike talked amongst themselves?

She turned to look at Dustin. El could feel his eyes on her from beside her.

He looked away, staring off at the bookshelf behind her when she locked eyes with him.

"Hello, Dustin."

"What, oh, hey, El!" Dustin sputtered. "I was just looking off behind you. Not at you, or anything. I just wanted to know if that *book* over there, was indeed a book. And it is. Mystery solved."

El smiled, shaking her head. Dustin was a *terrible* liar.

It felt like *all* of Mike's friends were staring at her when she first entered the room. But as time went on, they had all gone off to do their own thing as they waited for Mike to *finish up the campaign*, as he called it.

"Is there anything I can help you with?" She asked Dustin.

"Nope! I'm fine." He nodded, lacing his fingers together.

"Really? Because it seems like you and the guys have all been staring at me since I got here."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Dustin shook his head. "Lucas is busy trying to *woo* Max and Will is talking to Mike as he puts the finishing touches on the campaign. I don't think they've been staring at you."

"Yes," El nodded. "But *you* have. What's up?"

Dustin looked at her, then glanced back to Mike. He leaned in and whispered. "Mike told us about how you guys kissed..."

"Uh..." El blushed. She knew Mike had told his friends, but she didn't think they'd go and bring it up to her. "Yes, we... we did?"

"Cool." Dustin nodded, sitting up straight again. "So like, are you guys dating now? Are we gonna have to sit with you and Max at lunch for the rest of they year? Or at least until you guys break up... Are *you* gonna sit with *us* in the AV room for lunch?"

"Um." El's blush somehow deepened. She hadn't really thought about the future. Dustin was bombarding her with questions that she didn't really know the answer to. Although, she had thought of at least a couple of them before.

"We aren't dating." She answered definitively, as if that answered all of his other questions. It was the only thing she could say for certain. Even if she didn't like the answer.

"What?" Dustin exclaimed. Will looked up from where he was sitting beside Mike to questioningly gaze at them, but other than that, no one seemed to notice Dustin's outburst.

"Why not?" He asked her, tone slightly lower this time, although still as emphasized. "He's got like, a *massive* crush on you."

And just when El thought she had gotten her blush under control...

"Well, we haven't really talked about our, uh... We haven't talked about our *relationship*."

"Well, you guys better get on that."

"That's what Max said..." El muttered. "Why do you care, anyway?"

"What? A guy can't want his friend to be *happy*?" Dustin innocently said.

El glared at him, lowering her eyebrows.

"Uh... Also, you're like... *really* popular." He admitted. Dustin looked around the room to Will and Lucas. "It might help *us* out."

El rolled her eyes. "Seriously? Being popular doesn't matter."

El felt like she's said the same thing so many times but she really believed it. To her, being popular doesn't matter. She couldn't care less.

"Of course *you'd* say that." Dustin whined. "It's easy to not care about popularity when you're *already* popular."

"Does it look like I'm popular?" El asked. "All I've ever done is hang out with Max 24/7. It's not like I'm swamped with friends. People just don't mess with me because my dad's a cop."

"Well, that makes a bit too much sense." Dustin grumbled. "You're telling me *I've* got more friends than El Hopper?"

"Technically, *you* guys are my friends now. So like, not just Max anymore."

"Yeah, but like... At one point in life. I had more friends than you." Dustin nodded.

"I mean, *technically*, yeah."

"I guess that makes you a bit of a *loser*, then." Dustin joked.

"But it doesn't make my dad any less of a cop." She threatened, jokingly, of course.

Dustin gulped in fear and El figured she had made some slight progress with getting to know Mike's friends. So it was a win-win, really.

El was really starting to like Mike's friends. They were nice to her before, but now that she got to slowly know them, they were funny and pretty cool, like him.

El thought back to what Dustin said earlier. Is she going to eat lunch with them? Will they eat lunch with her and Max? El didn't know,

but she liked the idea of *either* happening.

Mike had stood up, holding a closed notebook in front of him. "It's done."

"Finally." Max said. "You made us wait, like, an hour."

"It's been twelve minutes."

"It's done? Cool." El said. She turned to Dustin. "Mike said there was a surprise with this campaign."

"A surprise?" Dustin said incredulously. "What kind of surprise?"

"Well, it's not much of a surprise if I spoil it. Just listen and he'll tell you."

"This campaign will be a bit different, though." Mike said. "It is *very* different."

"A good different?"

"Yes." Mike said. "This campaign will be our longest campaign yet."

"What?" Lucas said, standing up from beside Max. "Longer than the one we did at the start of summer?"

"Yep. *Thirteen* hours."

"Holy shit." Dustin said.

"This is gonna be awesome."

El smiled. She wouldn't be able to stay for the entire thing, but she'd be able to enjoy it while she could.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

The first thing El learned about *Dungeons and Dragons*, or D&D, as everyone insisted she call it, was that it is *very* confusing.

Like, El sat there for at least an hour and had *no* idea what was happening. She didn't want to keep interrupting and ruin their experience but some of the things they did made no sense.

They kept rolling *perception checks*. El had no idea what it was, but they kept doing it.

Max seemed confused, too. Although, she didn't mind voicing whatever questions came to her mind. Max, however, seemed to be picking up the game fairly quickly, at least, *a lot* quicker than El could.

El sat beside Mike at the head of the table. He was the *Dungeon Master*, as they called it. It seemed a bit dramatic, for El, since the whole term was fairly gruff and didn't describe Mike at all, in her opinion. He was all kind and sweet and a *Dungeon Master* were definitely not the first words that she would use to describe him.

He had a tri-fold piece of cardboard propped up at their end of the table. She watched as he rolled the dice and consulted a notebook every now and then, reaching around and positioning the pieces on the board.

And even though El didn't know *anything* about the game, she knew just from watching Mike that he was a good storyteller.

He spoke with his hands, telling the story of four adventurers in faraway lands. He described the landscape around them with such detail that El could feel herself *actually* there. It was quite amazing, really, and she was glad that he had invited her and Max along. This seemed like a side of him that not many people got to see.

She felt lucky.

The other boys were really into the story, but it seemed like *Max* was the one who was enjoying it the most.

"Shut up!" Max yelled to El, who was trying to whisper some joke to Mike. "You're ruining my immersion."

El's eyes went wide and she just smiled, sitting back down in her chair.

She also got to see Mike and his friends (*her* friends) work as a team. She could watch their decision-making process and it amazed her how well they worked together. Kind of like when she watched them work on the video project they're doing in AV Club

Sure, there were disagreements, but compromises were made and the story continued.

And before El knew it, she was cheering along with the rest of the boys when they defeated one of the bosses. She was deadly silent as she watched them sneak past a group of guards. It was exciting and fun and something that she's never seen before.

During a lull in the campaign, as Lucas, Dustin and Will discussed what to do (with Max popping her own suggestions in) El kicked Mike's leg, grabbing his attention.

She also grabbed his hand underneath the table, smiling up at him.

"This is really fun." She told him.

"Yeah?" He smiled, looking down at her. "I'm glad you're enjoying it. I put a lot of work into this kinda stuff."

"Well, it's definitely been worth it so far."

He squeezed her hand under the table and beamed at her.

"It's a shame I won't be able to stay to watch you guys complete it."

Mike frowned. "We could, uh, put it on hold and finish it next weekend, if you're free?"

"Mike!" El said, smacking his leg. "Don't even think about doing that. You'll be forcing everyone else to wait. And that is not fair to them."

"Jeez! Sorry..." He muttered, scratching the back of his neck. "Maybe we should take a small food break or something?"

"I could use some food." Her stomach had been quietly rumbling for the past twenty minutes.

El looked at the clock. It was almost *10:00 pm*. They had been doing this campaign for almost *five* hours. Which meant there were only *eight* hours left.

"Hey guys." Mike called out. "You guys down for a food break?"

"Yeah, sounds good."

"Cool."

"Hey, Max." El said to her friend. "We need to get going soon. Hop wants me back home."

"Shit..." Max muttered. "I guess I won't be able to finish the campaign with you guys."

Lucas' mouth gaped. "Maybe we could, like... Maybe we could stop it now, and finish it next week?"

Will nodded. "Yeah, we started this together. We'll finish it together."

Dustin seemed hesitant but agreed pretty easily. "I don't mind waiting until next week."

Mike turned to El smirked. "They seem fine with it."

She lightly kicked his leg, smiling. "Fine. I guess I'll be seeing you next weekend."

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El wrapped up her goodbyes, hovering around the door, not wanting to fully leave yet.

Mike walked up and she pulled him into a quick hug.

In his ear, she whispered, "We never really got that moment alone to talk..."

"Yeah, sorry about that."

"You're tutoring me after school Monday, right?" She asked him.

He nodded against the top of her head. "Yeah."

"We can talk then."

She pulled away and looked at the rest of the people around her. Max was giving her the *look* and El would've glared or something but she looked down at Max's hands instead.

Her eyes widened as Lucas' hand was slightly grazing Max's. They were definitely talking about *that* in the car ride home.

"I had a lot of fun, guys. Thank you." El said to everyone, one final time. "I'll see you in class tomorrow."

She gave them a small wave and turned to walk to her car, Max following her.

She got in her car and watched as they gave her a final wave. They went back inside, except for Mike. Who seemed to be waiting until they left to go back inside.

El started her car and gave him a small wave.

"You totally want to kiss him, don't you?" Max said from the passenger seat beside her.

"Um..."

"Make it *quick*." Max muttered.

El blushed slightly but decided to take the opportunity. She pushed open the car door and paced back to Mike.

He seemed confused. "Uh, did you forget something or-"

El stepped in close to him, resting her hand on his chest. The only light was from her car headlights and a small porch light, but the way Mike's face glowed was golden.

"Thank you." El whispered, gazing at him fondly.

She stepped onto the tips of her toes and snaked her other arm around his back. She leaned forward and lightly planted her lips on his.

He made a soft, strangled noise but placed his good hand on her hip nonetheless, responding to the kiss.

El pulled away, *knowing* Max would definitely lay on the horn if they take too long. "I'll see you Monday."

Mike sputtered, his face a deep shade of red. "What? Uh, Monday... Yeah, Monday. I'll see you Monday..."

He smiled at her one last time before she got in her car.

El pulled out of his driveway, ready to go home.

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"So..." El said casually. She turned down the volume of her radio so Max could hear her. "When we said goodbye to the guys, I happened to notice you and Lucas' hands *awfully* close. Like *touching* close."

"Hmm?" Max said, turning to look at El. "Close like you and Mike for the entire night? Yes, we noticed you two playing *footies* under the table."

El huffed. "Well, I feel like we're *allowed* to do that now."

"Are you guys dating?"

"Well, technically... No."

"Then that means me and Lucas's hands can occasionally *barely* touch." Max smirked, crossing her arms.

hello people that read author's notes. how are you?

here is another chapter. i hope you enjoy it. I posted it a bit

early, just because I hate making you wonderful people wait. next chapter, things start to get *spicy* between el and mike. so definitely be on the lookout for that.

there isn't really much more to say for this author's note. so please be sure to review. I would really appreciate it. As always all mistakes are mine and I hope you all enjoyed.

9. chapter nine

hopefully you like this chapter. sometimes its hard to write out what i'm thinking so i hope i was able to describe what mike was feeling good enough

Words w/out AN: 7000 +

Pairing(s): Mileven, Lumax

I own nothing.

the social system: chapter nine

Mike was waiting in the library for El after school Monday.

He was sorting his textbooks and binders on the table he usually sat at. He had spare pencils in his bag, with the pencil he usually used beside the piece of paper in front of him. He reached into his bag to set his textbook on the table, but frowned when he couldn't find the right one.

Where was his calculus textbook? He swore he remembered his textbook being in his bag when he packed up for English class. He was talking to El as he gathered his things at the end of the class. He actually would have walked with her to the library but he needed to make a stop at the... *AV Club*.

Mike must've left his book in the AV room when he quickly stopped by.

He stood up and rushed to the AV room, wanting to get back to the library as fast as possible. Mike didn't want El waiting for him, or anything.

He also really wanted to talk to El. She had told him that they were going to talk about *them* during their tutoring session. Mike both wanted to talk to her about it and *not* talk to her about it.

It was a bit confusing.

On one hand he really wanted to know how El felt about them, as in their relationship. She had told him earlier that she really liked him, which was great. Mike felt the same way. (Unless she had spontaneously changed her mind throughout the school day, which would *not* be great.)

But on the other hand, what if she didn't want a relationship with him? Because there was a difference between liking someone and dating someone. If she ever decided to date him, it would probably tarnish the way people thought about her. Mike was a *total* nerd, after all. And yes, deep down in his mind, he knew she liked him. He knew she didn't care about her reputation or popularity in Dustin's stupid *social system*. He knew he was overthinking this and all of his doubts and worries were creeping to the forefront like they always do when he was given too much time to think. He knew he was being irrational.

But that's exactly what Mike did!

He was always nervous. He was always overthinking everything. From his first day of school, where he thought Mrs. Sanders was accusing him of cheating on the test, to right now, where he didn't know if the girl he had a crush on liked him back, even though she had *specifically* said that she really liked him.

And the only thing that was a constant, that was always on his mind, was El and his feelings for her. Because if he doubted anything else, he knew he would always like her.

Which seemed a bit drastic, since he has only known her for like a week, but he was being sincere. He hasn't felt like this about anybody else before. El was always on his mind. He felt twenty different emotions all at once when he was around her, it was kind of jarring.

Mike felt anxious, nervous, scared, happy, excited and so many more. She made him feel jittery, unable to sit still. He was always tapping his fingers or bouncing his leg.

And when El was around, like physically next to him, his nervousness increased tenfold. But instead of being unable to keep his tapping fingers still, he had to force himself to not reach out and touch her...

Because that was something that happens now. Ever since they kissed, he's wanted to do it again. He's wanted to touch her again, feel her in his hands.

He was kind of obsessed.

And sure, he was obsessed before they kissed, but now... Now that he's had a *taste* of El. He can't think of anything else but her lips on his and the way she felt in his hands.

Mike sighed.

Hopefully having a conversation with El about whatever it is they were would help alleviate some of the stress he felt.

It couldn't make him *more* stressed, right?

He made it to the door of the AV room, reaching forward to turn the handle. He frowned when it wouldn't budge.

The door was locked.

Which wasn't a problem or anything, he'd just have to hunt down Mr. Clarke, get a key, come back, unlock the door, grab his book, re-lock the door, return the key, then go to the library.

Which wasn't *that* many things to do.

But Mike was kind of in a hurry. He wanted to see El as soon as possible so they could talk. Maybe she was already in the library waiting for him?

It turned out he would hear her before he would see her.

He had started walking back to the library to check if she was there waiting. If she wasn't, he would send her a quick text saying he needed to get his textbook. If she was, he would hope she had her textbook on her.

Although that was unlikely since she barely kept *any* books on her.

He almost rounded the corner ahead of him but Mike stopped when

he heard some voices.

It was El. He smiled.

He didn't mean to eavesdrop, but El had continued speaking before he could decide whether or not he should make his presence known.

"They're really smart." She said. "They're smart and I need to pass."

"Oh," Was that *Troy*? Why was El talking to *Troy*? "So you're just using them for a good grade? That's pretty badass."

"Thanks, they're just a bunch of nobodies. *Nerds*." El said. Mike's grin dropped and a horror-filled look took its place.

He wanted to step away, to cover his ears and pray that she was talking about some *other* group of people.

But Mike couldn't move. He was locked in place and his feet wouldn't obey him. The only thing he could do was stand and listen as El continued talking.

"That's right." He heard *Troy* agree with her.

Mike could imagine his *malicious* grin when he said that. The idea sickened him.

He couldn't take it anymore. Mike *knew* El was talking about him and his friends. It couldn't have been anyone else. Mike was the only one tutoring her in school.

How could she say that stuff?

Mike wanted to believe that he misheard her but *nothing* could explain why she said those things.

El *knew* how Mike felt about *Troy*. She *knew* what *Troy* did to him, to his friends, the history behind them. But here she was, talking to *Troy*, *insulting* Mike and his friends.

He stopped listening to what she was saying, too lost in his thoughts.

El was no better than Troy, he thought. She was just like every other popular person in their school. She was just like every bully that he and his friends had encountered.

He wanted to believe otherwise, but here she was, saying the same things everyone else said.

He wanted to believe there was a hint of doubt in her voice. Maybe she was lying to Troy?

Mike shook his head. He knew what his ears just heard. Even he wasn't *that* pathetic to try and convince himself he was hearing things he wasn't.

Mike felt himself shaking. He tried to stop but tears started pooling at his eyes.

The talking between El and Troy stopped. He heard footsteps echoing through the hallway away from him.

El stumbled around the corner and Mike gaped, staring at her.

He didn't know what to do. He didn't know what to say.

"Mike?" She said, shocked. As if she didn't expect he would *hear* her when she was talking about him and his friends behind his back. "What are you-"

"Save it." He interrupted. He didn't want to hear anything else she was going to say. He didn't want to hear any more of her lies.

All of this time she was calling herself a friend, saying to his face that she *liked* him. But then turning around and stabbing him in the back the first moment she got.

It was all just a facade so she could *use* him to pass. So she could get a passing grade and then drop him and their friendship when it was convenient for her.

Mike didn't like being used.

He tried to hold in his tears. But it didn't seem to be working.

"I thought you were my *friend*. I heard what you said. About us. About *me*."

Because that's what Mike cared about the most, deep down. She had played him. Strung him along and manipulated his feelings for her.

Just so she could pass calculus.

He watched as she tried to reach for him. He watched her eyes. They seemed broken.

Caught in her lies, he thought.

"It was Troy! He-" She tried to say.

"I thought you were different." Mike said, trying to hold his resolve, but it didn't work as tears streamed down his face.

"I thought you were different." He whispered again.

"Mike-"

"I gotta go." He muttered, turning away from her. "Tutoring is cancelled."

He couldn't bear to look at her again. He needed her gone, right now. She would just lie to him again. Try to convince him that this wasn't what it seemed like.

That's what manipulative people did, right? Blamed other people.

He stormed down the hall. He heard her call his name behind her, but he didn't bother turning around. Nothing she could say would make him stop.

She had told him they would talk about their relationship after school. They would get the opportunity to figure out what they were.

Mike figured she just decided what they were.

Mike was just a nerd and El was just using him to pass.

That's it. Nothing more, nothing less.

He exited a side door, breaking out into a sprint when El couldn't see him.

Mike wasn't proud, but he cried the entire way home.

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Mike pulled open the door to his house, ignoring the greetings from his sister and rushing to his room.

He closed the door and flopped onto his bed, quietly allowing the tears to stream onto his pillow. It got to the point where it was soaked, so he flipped it and continued crying into the barren side.

Why had he let El worm her way into his heart? He was perfectly happy with the three best friends he already had. Why did he have to go and make a new one?

Why did he have to *care* about the pretty girl with a nice smile? It sucked.

He sucked.

She sucked.

Mike wished he had never gotten to know her. He wished he hadn't started to develop feelings for her.

He wished he never developed a crush on her.

Because yes, he did have a crush on her. It was stupid now, but he thought things would work out between them.

He *hoped* things would work out between them. He had gone as far as to plan out the conversation they would have during their tutoring session.

He would gather all of his courage and tell her that he *really* liked her. He would ask how she felt and then suggest if they could try dating.

That is assuming, she would say she liked him back.

But that was obviously a *lie*. She didn't like him. She just liked how he was good at math.

He heard his phone ringing from where he threw it on his bed. He picked it up and set it to silent, quickly checking who was phoning him.

Of course, it was El. She probably wanted to explain, say how it was some misunderstanding that way Mike would continue tutoring her so she wouldn't fail.

He threw his phone back onto his bed, satisfied that he couldn't hear the incessant ringing.

He didn't want to talk to her right now. Didn't he make that obvious enough?

Mike felt tired. Although, Emotionally exhausted was probably a better way to explain it.

He had stopped crying a few minutes ago, replaced with a quiet sniffing. He closed his eyes, letting them rest. He knew it was stupid to cry. He was supposed to be a *man*. Men don't cry.

At least, that's something his dad would say.

But Mike *really* couldn't help it. He was just feeling too many things at once and the tears just seemed to slip out on their own.

Before he knew it, he was drifting to sleep.

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Mike woke up with a groan, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

He groggily checked his phone and saw *eleven* missed calls from El. He ignored them.

There was also a couple of texts in the Party group chat. They had asked about some homework earlier.

He checked the time and saw it was past *seven pm*. He hadn't meant to fall asleep. He had homework to complete still. Now he just had less time to do it.

He unlocked his phone and quickly typed a message to the rest of the Party.

Mike: code red. don't talk to el or max. meetup asap

He needed to explain to his friends as soon as possible what was happening between him and El.

He had to include Max, too. Although she seemed like a good person.

Then again, so did El. So *obviously* his judgement couldn't be trusted.

Mike thought about it more and *all* of his friend's judgements couldn't be trusted. El had managed to sneak into his friend group, under the noses of *everyone*.

She had obviously tricked them as much as she had tricked him.

After all, she had insulted *them*, too.

A text had lit up his phone screen.

Lucas: whats up? im omw

He quickly typed up a response.

Mike: ill explain when we're all here.

Dustin: your basement right?

Mike: yeah

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"Dude, are you alright?" Lucas said as he entered the basement.

Mike was already waiting, sitting on the couch deep in thought.

"Because you look terrible." Lucas continued. "Have you been crying or something?"

"Yes." Mike muttered, not meeting Lucas' eyes.

Sure, Mike could've lied about the crying thing, maybe saved himself some embarrassment. But the Party has a code, a set of rules.

One of those rules was that *friends don't lie*.

If there was ever a time to be serious and tell the truth, a *code red* meeting was definitely one of those times.

"Shit..." Lucas said. "What happened?"

"Where's Will and Dustin?" Mike asked, ignoring his question.

"Will's mom is driving him." Lucas said. "He's picking up Dustin on the way. They should be here soon."

"Alright."

Mike could see Lucas pacing nervously out of the corner of his eye.

"I'll explain everything when they get here." Mike said, in an attempt to ease his friend's comfort.

Lucas nodded, taking a seat on the recliner beside him.

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Dustin and Will barged through the door, wildly looking around.

"What's happening? What's the matter?" They exclaimed.

"Mike was waiting for us all to get here."

"Well, we're here?"

Mike stood up and all of his friend's eyes turned to him.

"El lied to us."

Mike explained everything he heard her say. All of the emotions he felt earlier came rushing back and Mike found it hard to speak properly.

His friends had awestruck expressions on their faces. They couldn't believe him. Mike would've had a hard time believing it too, if he hadn't heard her say it himself.

"There's no way she would do that, right?" They had protested.

Mike shook his head, quickly looking down and wiping his eyes. "Well it's true! She lied to us. She lied to me..."

Will's face fell. Lucas was shaking his head in disbelief and Dustin was looking down, muttering to himself.

"She used us." Mike said, his voice cracking. "She was *never* our friend."

"She was nice to us, though." Will said. "Her and Max."

"Yeah, Max is pretty cool..." Lucas said. "There's no way they were just using us."

"Well I don't know how else to explain it." Mike sighed. "She was talking to Troy! She knows how I- How *we* feel about him."

Mike waved his injured arm in the air exasperatedly, trying to get his point across to his friends.

"It makes sense, though." Dustin resolutely nodded. "She's *popular*, higher up in the social system than us. There was no *real* reason for her to hang around us unless she had something to gain."

"So what, then?" Lucas asked. "Do we just ignore them in class? Pretend they don't exist?"

Will nodded. "What are we supposed to do?"

"I- I don't know." Mike said. "I have no idea..."

The Party sat around the coffee table in silence.

Nothing more needed to be said. They were each in their own separate degrees of shock, taking the news and processing it.

"Well, what do you want us to do?"

"Ignore them." Mike said. "They betrayed us. We don't need them."

"Are you sure that's the right choice?"

"I'm not sure of anything." Mike said. Usually he had the answers, whether it was some homework questions or a test. But now? Knowing El had *easily* played him, making him unable to trust himself? He didn't know.

"Maybe we should try talking to them?" Will suggested. Lucas nodded along.

"How do we know it won't be a lie?" Dustin protested. "As much as I want to believe they're our friends, if Mike said she went behind our backs and betrayed us..."

He didn't need to finish his sentence. Everyone got the point.

"And you're *sure* it was El who said this?"

"Yes! I'm sure." Mike exclaimed. Of course it was *her*. She was the one who had said those things. He *knew* it was her voice. "Do you not believe me?"

"We believe you..." Will amended. "I just don't think we *want* to."

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

Mike skipped school for the first time in his life the next day.

He had missed school before. He didn't have *perfect* attendance. But all of his absences had a *reason* behind them. Whether he was on holiday or sick in bed.

He didn't mean to skip school that day, it just kind of happened.

Since he accidentally took a nap when he got home yesterday, it made it so he couldn't fall asleep at the time he usually goes to bed. So he ended up staying up later, and therefore waking up later.

It was probably a good thing, since he didn't know if he would be able to even *handle* seeing El that day. He had gotten extremely anxious the night before, thinking up all of the possible situations he might find himself in.

He imagined himself walking into calculus class, awkwardly making eye contact with El. He would rush to his seat, ignoring her. Maybe she'd try and get his attention a few times.

Mike figured she'd probably be able to get it.

He'd have to sit through the entire class knowing El was just a couple feet behind him. At that point it'd just be better to stay home. Mike knew he wouldn't be able to focus on the lesson.

When the bell would finally ring, he could imagine himself shooting up and immediately leaving the class, giving El no time to catch up to him like he usually would. Mike would go straight to the AV room for lunch with his friends and try to pretend that everything was alright.

When clearly, everything was not alright.

Fast-forwarding to English, Mike was anxious even *thinking* about sitting beside El. Sharing a book with El.

He didn't think he'd be able to survive calculus, and she wasn't even in his *field of view* in that class.

Sitting beside her, knowing he could see her out of the corner of his eye would be *way* too much.

No. It was probably better that he woke up late that day, considering

just the *thought* of El made him sick to his stomach.

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Mike felt raw.

He was sitting in his bed, staring at his ceiling.

It's not like he had anything else to do. All of his homework was finished, so he just had to wait until his friends got home so he could get a copy from them.

He could feel his heart beating in his chest. Every thump a reminder of *El*.

His phone was beside his head, resting on his pillow. Mike was replaying a voicemail over and over again.

Around lunch time, El had phoned him. He didn't answer, but she left a voicemail. Which was new. She hadn't done that before.

Mike shakily held the phone up the first time he listened to it.

"Uh, hey... Mike. It's me, El. I just wanted to let you know that... That I have a copy of the homework from Mrs. Sanders' class for you. I'll give it to Will, unless you don't mind me bringing it?" There was a gap in the recording, as if she was waiting for a response. "If you don't call or text me, then I'll just give it to Will during English."

"I, uh... I know you're probably mad. At me. At what I said... but there's an explanation, if you're willing to hear it." El said, her voice was soft and quiet. She sounded just as raw as Mike felt. Mike couldn't help but think that she was *genuinely* sad. "I'm sorry. I just... If you're willing to hear me out, let me know. If not... I don't blame you."

The voicemail ended and Mike was left with the drone of the dial tone.

He had listened to it a few more times, analyzing each word for... For

something. Mike didn't know. Maybe he was trying to spot any lies, checking to see if she was being real or not.

Maybe he just wanted to listen to the sound of her voice.

Mike *really* didn't know at this point.

He considered texting her a response. What would he say?

She said she could explain, but it seemed pretty self-explanatory to Mike.

Mike shook his head. He didn't want to hear whatever it is she wanted to say. Not yet, at least. Mike needed some time to cool down. Even he could see that his judgement was clouded.

But after some much needed sleep, he felt a little better.

Although he was laying in bed, repeatedly listening to a voicemail she left him. So maybe he wasn't *that* much better.

His stomach growled and Mike took that as his cue to get some food. He had stayed in his room all day to avoid his mother, who was probably in the kitchen right now.

She would no doubt interrogate him about why he wasn't at school, and then Mike would have to explain *everything*, and at that point, it just seemed like too much effort for just some food.

But unfortunately for Mike, he needed food to live. So his need to survive outweighed the trouble he could possibly get in.

He rubbed his eyes as he got up, walking out of his room to the kitchen.

He lightly stepped down the stairs, but halfway through realized *what was the point?*

It's not like he'd be able to sneak into the kitchen, where his mother is, and make himself a sandwich.

Mike walked into the kitchen, where he saw his mother, just as he

expected.

She turned around and frowned at him.

Mike looked to the ground, trying to avoid the scolding he was about to get.

"Michael? What are you doing..." She started to say. "What's wrong?"

Mike frowned, looking up. Wasn't he about to get in trouble? "Uh, nothing?"

She gave him a *look*. "Don't lie to me. You look terrible. You have bags under your eyes and you seem pale. Are you sick?"

"No." Mike shook his head, rubbing the bags out of his eyes. "I'm not sick."

"Well, what's wrong?" She asked, pressing when he wouldn't answer. "I *am* your mom."

Mike took a seat at one of the stools, debating if he should tell his mom the truth.

"Is this about those girls you had over on the weekend?"

Mike looked up, shocked. "How'd you know about that?"

Mike was stunned at how quickly his mom figured out what he was thinking about. Mike wondered if it was that *parental instinct* his mother always said she had.

"You've had your friends over almost every weekend for the past four years. I'm pretty sure I'd notice when the voices coming from downstairs are from *girls*. Especially when you were all yelling and screaming about that game you play." His mom said, crossing her arms.

Mike blushed. "Sorry I didn't tell you I invited them."

"Oh, it's no problem." She said, waving her arm. "Bring them over again. It sounded like you guys had fun."

Mike got a bad taste in his mouth. He *doubted* he'd invite them over to finish the campaign after what happened. "Yeah, I don't think they'll be coming over again..."

"Are they the reason you skipped school today?" His mother said sternly.

Mike nodded, looking down.

"What's wrong?" She urged. "I'm here to listen."

Mike was silent for a moment.

"We got in a fight." Mike admitted.

"Who did?" His mom asked. "You and the guys? Or those girls you invited?"

"Her name is El." Mike said. "I was tutoring her for math. That's how we met."

"Oh..." His mom cooed. "El? Huh?"

"Yes." Mike blushed.

"So what happened?"

"Her and her friend, Max, started to become our friends." Mike explained to his mom. "They had lunch with us a couple times. They seemed super cool. I, uh, I enjoyed hanging out with her- *them*."

"Uh-huh." She nodded. "I'm sure you were *just* tutoring her, too."

"Mom!" Mike said, blushing. "Now is *not* the time to talk about that..."

"*Oh*, so something *did* happen between you two..." She said, mainly to herself. "So what happened?"

"I don't know..." Mike muttered. "I overheard El talking to Troy."

Mike watched as his mom frowned. She had never liked Troy. Especially when she saw what Troy did to his arm.

"She was talking to him about how me and my friends were *nerds* and stuff. Saying things like how she was just using us to pass her calculus class."

"Oh my gosh, sweetie. I'm so sorry." His mom comforted him. She stepped forward and put an arm around him. "That must've been terrible to hear from someone you thought was a friend."

"I-It was..." Mike said, his voice cracking. "It seemed like it came out of nowhere. Before that, she was totally fine to be around. *Great*, even. It doesn't make sense."

"Some things in life don't ever make sense." She said. "It's weird how she would do something like that since you guys were *getting along* so well."

Mike's face turned a deep shade of red. He did *not* want to talk to his mom about *kissing*.

"I thought things were good, too." He said. "But I guess I'm not that good of a judge of character."

"You are a smart kid, Michael." His mom said. "The decisions you've made have always been good ones. There must've been *something* about her that you liked. Don't let what happened define what you think you are."

"Wow." Mike deadpanned. He sarcastically said, "That was inspiring."

"Well, I guess I'm just an *amazing* mother." She said jokingly. "So have you tried talking to El?"

"Not yet. It happened yesterday and I think I need some time, first. I don't even know if I can face her..."

"When it comes to the affairs of the heart-"

"*Affairs of the heart?*" Mike interrupted.

"It's best to listen to your gut." She continued on. "What does your gut say?"

Mike looked down at his stomach, silent for a minute.

It loudly rumbled and Mike remembered the reason he had come downstairs in the first place.

"Food." He said. "My gut wants food."

His mom laughed and walked over to the fridge. "I can whip something up real quick?"

"Sounds good." Mike nodded, he scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. "Uh, thank you. For the advice. I think it really helped, talking to you."

"Anytime, sweetie. I'm always here to help." His mom chirped. She looked at him, more serious this time. "If you *ever* skip school again... Just tell me, first... Okay?"

Mike nodded, glad his mother wasn't mad at him. "Yes, of course."

"Oh, also, don't forget you have that doctor's appointment on Thursday." His mom reminded him. "Wow, aren't you lucky? Missing school twice in *one week*."

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Mike heard a knock on his bedroom door, before watching it swing open.

"Hey." Will said, setting his bag down on the ground by Mike's bed.

"Hey." Mike nodded, looking up from the campaign he was working on. "What's up?"

"I have the homework that you missed." Will held a stack of papers in front of him, placing them down beside Mike on the bed. "El gave me the homework that you missed from calculus."

"I know."

"So, uh... How are you?" Will asked. "You didn't come to school today."

"I know." Mike repeated. "I'm okay. Better."

"That's good." Will nodded. "Have you talked to El, yet?"

"Yet?" Mike asked. "No, I haven't talked to her."

"Okay. Yeah, Okay..." Will nodded again.

"Uh, *should* I have talked to her?"

"Well... Maybe you should?" Will suggested. "You haven't really listened to her side of the story. Maybe you should give her a chance?"

"I know what I heard. Why are you defending her? After what she said about us?"

"I'm not defending her." Will said, holding his hands up. "You could at least hear her out, though."

Mike sighed, unsure of what to do. Unsure of what to think.

The only thing that he knew for certain was that he was hurt. And even then, if it turned out El had an explanation for why she said those things, that would be put into question, too.

"I'll think about it, okay?" Mike said, compromising. "Just give me some time..."

"Yeah, sure man. No problem." Will said. "Do you plan on coming to school tomorrow?"

"I only missed today because I overslept." Mike muttered. "Although I don't really wanna see her right now. So I guess it worked out."

Will nodded.

"Is it cool if I hang around for a bit?." He said, probably in an attempt to change the subject. "Do some homework?"

"Yeah, of course."

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Mike went to school the next day and he liked to think he was prepared for it.

He had all of the homework that he missed finished and organized in his binder, ready to hand in.

He also had a copy of the notes that were taken in class.

What he wasn't ready for, however, was seeing El.

He wasn't prepared to hear her voice or watch the way her lips moved.

He had tried avoiding her, although it was hard since he sat fairly close to her in two of his classes.

Calculus was alright, since he sat in front of her. All he needed to do was stare straight ahead and *not* think about the person roughly two feet behind him.

She made it hard when she kicked the back of his chair to get his attention.

But Mike managed to power through it, promptly focusing as much as he could on the lesson.

Lunch was also fairly easy to avoid El. He simply rushed out of Calculus, making a beeline for the AV room. He heard El's voice calling out his name behind him, but he didn't turn back.

She didn't attempt to go to the AV room, either. So Mike was able to eat lunch with at least a *small* sense of peace.

English was actually a lot harder to avoid her in, considering they shared a book and sat beside each other. If Mike sat in his usual seat then he'd be able to constantly see her out of the corner of his eye.

Mike didn't know if he could handle that.

And yes, Mike knew he'd have to look at her *one day*, but for now he was perfectly fine living in a world where the hole in his heart didn't exist and the person who caused it *also* didn't exist.

Truly a win-win.

Mike waited as long as he could before entering the class. He pictured El sitting in their regular seats, their regular book on the desk in front of her.

The briefest glimpse of an idea, skipping the class, flitted into his mind but he quickly dismissed it. He had gotten *way* too lucky yesterday. Where his mom *wasn't* mad at him for skipping school. He didn't want to test his luck again.

Mike closed his eyes and deeply exhaled. He walked into the classroom.

El's eyes instantly shot to him. She seemed hopeful. Mike watched her sit up a bit straighter as he walked closer to her.

Mike felt his heart beating and looked away. He glanced at Will, who was also watching him.

Relief flooded his system as he saw the person who usually sat beside Will wasn't in class today. He quickly rushed into the open desk.

He felt El's eyes on his back for the rest of class, but he didn't turn around.

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When it came to the independent reading, Mike pulled out his own, unused book for the first time.

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"Are you guys coming over?" Mike asked his friends as they walked out of the school towards their cars.

"I am." Will nodded.

"I can in a bit." Lucas said. "I need to do a couple things at home, first. It should only take like, ten minutes."

"I can't." Dustin shook his head. "My cousin's visiting so I need to be home to *spend quality time with them*."

"Spending quality time with your family is *terrible*." Will joked.

"It is when all they wanna do is play with my action figures." Dustin whined. "Do you know how *long* it takes to set them all up?"

"Whatever, man." Lucas said. "We'll see you at Mike's Thursday, though, right?"

"Actually I won't be at school Thursday." Mike piped in.

"Skipping school *again*?"

"I have a doctor's appointment, actually."

"I didn't know a *broken heart* was something you went to the doctor's for."

Mike grumbled, figuring it's better not to respond.

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"I'm here." Lucas called out, entering Mike's basement.

Mike hummed in response.

"What's up?"

"Just doing homework." Will replied.

Lucas nodded, taking a seat beside Mike on the couch. "Did you get

all the homework from the day you missed?"

Mike nodded. "Yeah. Thanks, by the way. I couldn't read Dustin's terrible handwriting for Advanced Functions, so luckily there was your copy, too."

"Anytime..." Lucas said. "Anytime. You're gonna need another copy for tomorrow, right? Since you won't be there."

"Yeah. If you guys don't mind?"

"Not a problem." Will and Lucas said.

"Uh... What about the class you *don't* have with us?" Lucas innocently asked. "Y'know... Calculus?"

"What about it?" Mike asked carefully, setting his pencil down.

"How are you going to get a copy of the homework from that class if none of us are in it?"

Mike eyed Lucas suspiciously. He was acting weird. "El gave me a copy. She'll probably do it again..."

"Oh, El!" Lucas said, as if he had totally forgotten she existed. "How is the whole thing? Have you guys talked yet?"

Mike heard Will sigh beside him, looking down at the ground and shaking his head.

"Things haven't changed..." Mike said. "We haven't talked."

"Okay..." Lucas nodded.

"What's going on?" Mike asked, looking between Will, who was avoiding all eye contact and Lucas, who was nodding *too* much. "First, Will asked me if I had talked to El, now you?"

"Uh..." Lucas said, looking at Will. "Nothing's going on?"

"Why are you guys insisting I talk to El?" Mike pressed.

"We aren't *insisting*..." Will said. "But you haven't heard her side of the

story."

"And *you* have?" Mike asked. "What is going on?"

Will sighed. "El told me about what happened from her point of view. I think she's telling the truth. She asked me if I could ask you to talk to her."

"You *talked* to her?" Mike asked, kind of hurt since he specifically asked his friends not to.

"I didn't mean to." Will reassured him. "She cornered me after English."

"And *you*?" Mike asked, looking to Lucas. "Did you talk to El, too?"

"Max, actually..." Lucas muttered.

Mike sighed.

"Well, what'd she say?" Mike asked. "Was there some magic explanation that undoes everything she said about us?"

"I mean..." Will shrugged. "Yeah. What she said makes sense. She was trying to protect us. I think she's telling the truth."

"Well, what do you think?" Mike asked Lucas.

"Uh, I didn't talk to El. Max came up to me..."

"I know." Mike rolled his eyes. "What'd she say?"

"Well, Max asked for a favour..." Lucas explained, rubbing the back of his neck. "She wanted me to convince you to talk to El. I was, uh... I was pretty adamant, saying that was the last thing you wanted to do."

Mike nodded, gesturing for him to continue.

"But then she said something about going to Benny's to talk about it more..." Lucas hastily said. "We got some food, talked about what was happening and Max asked me to at least *suggest* talking to El to you."

Mike rolled his eyes again. "So you guys went on a date?"

"I couldn't say no, after that!" Lucas argued. "She had, like, a puppy dog face. It was too much. When I agreed she smiled and kissed me on the cheek and..."

"He literally went on a date." Mike said.

"When were you planning on telling us you went on a date?" Will said.

"I was hoping *you* would convince Mike to talk to El, *they'd* become friends again. We'd *all* become friends again and things wouldn't be so tense. And then I'd casually mention that I went to Benny's with Max."

"Wow, Dustin is missing a lot..."

"I know, right?" Lucas agreed with Will. "What a terrible time to have cousins over."

Mike couldn't process his own thoughts with their conversation. He snapped. "Can you guys let me think for a moment?"

Their conversation died down and the three were silent for a moment, the only sound coming from the ticking clock on the wall behind them.

"Do you *really* think I should talk to her?" Mike quietly asked, fidgeting with the pencil on the table.

Will nodded. "El seemed *genuinely* sad as she explained what happened. I think you should."

Lucas nodded along. "Max said she hasn't seen El like that before. She said she was desperate to *fix her best friend*."

"Desperate enough to go on a date with *you*?" Will joked.

"Hey!" Lucas glared.

Mike sighed, ignoring his friends squabbling. "I need to make a

call..."

He stood up, walking up the stairs and heading to his room.

He took his phone out of his pocket, dialing El's number. He hesitated before pressing call.

He heard the phone ring once before it stopped.

"Hello?" El whispered, almost breathless.

"Uh, hey..." Mike awkwardly said. What was he supposed to say?

"Hi..."

They didn't say anything after that. The line was silent for what seemed like too long.

Mike cleared his throat. "Um, I'm not going to be in school tomorrow..."

"Yeah?" El asked, seemingly disappointed. "Is that why you called?"

"Yeah." Mike nodded. He felt his heartbeat racing, just like it did when he saw her in English class. "I was wondering if you could get me a copy of the homework again."

"Yeah. I can do that." She agreed. "Is that all?"

"Um, if you ask Will... During English if you ask him..." Mike repeated. "He can give you the rest of my homework for the day. Maybe you could drop it off at my house for me? If you're free, that is... We could, uh, we could talk after."

"We can?" El asked. Mike heard some doubt in her voice.

"Uh, yeah. If you want. We can talk about... things."

"I would really like to talk about t-things." Mike heard El's voice crack over the phone.

"Are you crying?" Mike asked. "Is everything okay?"

"No, I'm- I'm fine." El reassured him, although she sounded a bit teary. "I'm just really glad you're willing to talk about... things with me."

Mike lightly chuckled. "Yeah... I guess I'll see you tomorrow then? I need to get back to doing homework with the guys..."

"Yeah." El agreed. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Mike didn't hang up, but neither did El. The line was silent between them again.

He heard her laugh on the other side of the call. "Goodbye, Mike."

"Bye." He smiled, before hanging up.

Mike was surprised at the relief he felt, knowing he would be seeing her.

hello here is another chapter. drop a review and tell me what you think. i had to put their relationship through *some* stress and problems. mainly because things that are worth it in the end are never easy to get. but also because it makes the story more interesting. cliff hanger endings are fun because it lets the reader interact with the story more, too. if i was reading this i'd be wondering how that conversation would go and what could el possible say to explain those terrible things she said.

in case it wasn't clear enough, yes, she did say those things and yes, it was about Mike and his friends. although mike isn't the most reliable narrator because his vision tends to get clouded with emotions and whatnot. so not *everything* about what he thinks he heard is accurate. (basically he heard all the words correctly, but the tone got skewed a bit)

uh, i tried to show the progression (and also a bit of how mike lets his emotions cloud his judgement) with this chapter. he starts off the chapter completely heartbroken and unable to think properly, but after some time he comes to his senses a bit (although, still very hesitant and insecure) and is willing to talk

things over with el. hopefully i was able to show that well (or at least well *enough*)

this chapter was a lot longer than i thought it'd be. i considered breaking it into two chapters. the story might have flowed better, too, if it was split up. for example if the conflict of this story was two of the the ten chapters might be better than if it was only one, or something like that. (not saying the conflict lasts for two chapters and not saying this fic will only be ten chapters long)

eh, i'm kinda iffy with this chapter. i like the concept but not sure if the execution is in the right place. would love to hear what you all think.

in other news, i just started university. so that's fun i guess. updates will still be every saturday (more like fridays, but okay) but seeing that this fic is nearing the end, i'm not sure when the next fic will be up and running. (actually i think the next fic will be a percy jackson soulmate au.) planning for the future, i'm not actually sure when my next stranger things fic will be. maybe leave a suggestion if you wanna see more stranger things stuff from me? otherwise i think i'll be focusing on other things. although just because university has started, doesn't mean i'll be less active on the site. you can still drop me a pm!

actually, thinking about it. i think i have a one-shot about Mike and El communicating over the phone and radios and stuff that i haven't posted yet. (actually i did post it but i didn't like it so i deleted it almost instantly. maybe i'll do a bit of editing for it and post that)

this all seems like stuff i should talk about on the very *last* chapter. so i'll save it for then. but speaking of the last chapter, i usually talk about super important stuff during the last chapter of a fic so be sure to check it out, whenever it comes around. looking at the story outline that i've created for this fic, chapter eleven might be the last one? that was also a fun coincidence that i didn't notice until now.

that seems like enough talking for me, so as always, all mistakes

are mine (although i have been decently trying with the editing)
and i hope you all enjoyed this update

10. chapter ten

im so sorry :)

Words w/out AN: 6900 +

Pairing(s): Mileven, Lumax

I own nothing.

the social system: chapter ten

El was walking down the hall, heading towards her tutoring session with Mike.

They were supposed to talk about their relationship, but the idea had El in shambles.

She wanted nothing more than to talk with Mike about it. Although she was nervous about what he might say. El really liked him. It was scary, really, how much she had started to think about him in the past week.

Every time she went to bed, she would consider wearing the shirt he leant her (Sometimes she gave in, unable to resist. The shirt smelling just like Mike was a comfortable thought as she slowly drifted to sleep.)

Every time she read a book, whether it was the one assigned in English or one of the ones she kept in a box in her closet, she would think of Mike. She would think of all the times they read *King Lear* in class and how much fun he had made reading, even though she had already loved it.

She had started to have really strong feelings for him in a really short amount of time.

Which she didn't regret at all, since Mike was probably the sweetest guy she had ever met.

They had agreed on discussing whatever feelings they had towards each other at the end of the day. Which, now that El thought about it, was a terrible idea, since it meant she had to go through the entire day with Mike, unable to talk about it until after English, during their tutoring session. The stress of what he might say filled her thoughts for the rest of the day. It made it hard to focus.

She had to *endure* through calculus class. Mike was only one seat in front of her, raptly paying attention to whatever lesson that Mrs. Sanders was teaching. She didn't know how he managed to pay attention to math. The only thing on El's mind was how she would bring up talking about *them*. Would she find a way to naturally bring it up during their tutoring session? During some conversation about factoring or graphing functions? Or would she have to wait until they *fully* finished their tutoring lesson before they could start talking about the important stuff.

Not to say calculus *wasn't* important, but she would much rather focus on the conversation that could lead to her kissing Mike again.

She didn't see Mike until lunch again, but in between that was Biology. She had the class with Max, but she also had it with Dustin and Lucas. Max had asked them to come sit at the back of the class, so they could all be closer.

Lucas had feebly protested, saying the view at the front was better, but after *one* look from Max, and he had folded like a chair, Dustin quickly following.

After Biology, Max and El followed Dustin and Lucas to the AV room. They decided to have lunch in there, since it was cozier than the large cafeteria. They had all fallen into an easy conversation.

Max had quietly joked about her and Mike's holding hands under the table, which they *weren't* doing, mind you. But their legs *did* happen to be linked together, so El didn't protest as much as she could have.

When English finally came and went, Mike needed to go to the AV room, so El had gone to her locker to grab a few books she might need.

She was walking down the hall when Troy had stopped her.

"Hey, El." He sneered, standing in front of her so she couldn't get by.

El frowned, as if she had tasted something bad. "What do you want, Troy?"

"Not much." He said, although she could tell it was a lie. His eyes raked over her and El had to muster as much self control as she could to prevent herself from punching the creep right there.

Not only was he disgustingly staring at her, but he was also the one who had hurt Mike's wrist. He was also the one who had said some disgusting things about *her*. He was also the one who had been tormenting Mike and his friends since they were kids.

She had never liked Troy before, but then again she had never really talked to him. But *now*, now she knew she didn't like him.

"If you don't want anything." El said. "Then I should get going. I have to go see my tutor."

"You know," He started, looking back up to her eyes. The glint in his eyes made her uncomfortable. "Word gets around the school fast, El."

"So what?" El said, not particularly caring what Troy or anyone else had to say about her.

El considered taking a step back, distancing herself from Troy. Maybe that would make her more comfortable.

"Well, you've been hanging out with Mike Wheeler and his friends, right?" Troy asked, although he seemed like he already knew the answer.

"So what if I have?" El said, feeling defensive of her friends. She wouldn't let some bully hurt them.

"You know they're losers, right?"

"They aren't losers."

"Are you seriously friends with them?" He genuinely asked her. As if he couldn't fathom the idea that she would have friends.

"So what if I am?" El asked, growing tired of being in Troy's presence.

"They're a bunch of nerds. They shouldn't really be hanging out with people like us..."

El frowned. She couldn't really believe that Troy was actually saying this kind of stuff. "Well, that's a bit-"

"Mike took a pretty good beating last week." Troy continued on, as if El hadn't even spoken.

El glared at Troy's smug face. "I think I remember hearing you were the one who beat him up."

"I don't like to punch and tell..." Troy said, rubbing his knuckles. "He probably deserved it, though."

"I'm pretty sure my father could arrest someone for assault." El said, hoping mentioning her father would get Troy to back off.

"Good thing I didn't do it." He winked. "It'd be a shame if something like that were to happen to him again, or even worse... To one of his little *friends*."

"What are you saying?" El asked, gritting her teeth together.

"I'm saying that you shouldn't be hanging out with people like that, or more *serious* things could happen to them."

El gasped, understanding what Troy was basically *telling* her. He wanted her to ditch Mike and her friends or else he would beat them all up.

She couldn't believe he was doing this.

She couldn't believe she was hearing this.

She knew that Troy never liked Mike and the guys, but to go so far and *beat them up* because she was friends with them? It was

unthinkable to her.

She glared at him, ready to tell him off, but she thought more about Mike.

About how sad he looked when he admitted to her that Troy had beaten him up. About how much pain he was in because he couldn't do regular things as easily. She remembered when he was at her house. He had seriously hurt himself just trying to knock on her door and shake her dad's hand.

And if that happened to *all* of her new friends?

She didn't want to hurt any of them. She didn't want any of them to be hurt.

"So?" Troy pressed. "Why do you hang out with those nerds?"

She begrudgingly gave him the answer he wanted to hear. The answer that would keep her friends safe.

"They're really smart." El said lamely, trying to push down the emotions in her throat. "They're smart and I need to pass."

"Oh," He laughed, throwing his head back. "So you're just using them for a good grade? That's pretty badass."

"Thanks..." El said, glaring at the ground. *She was doing the right thing*, she told herself. "They're just a bunch of nobodies. Nerds."

"That's right." He nodded, agreeing with her.

"So you can leave them alone."

"I'm glad you're smart, El." Troy said, before turning and walking down the hall. "I'll be seeing you then."

She didn't reply to him, instead waiting until he left before she let herself exhale. She didn't realize she was holding her breath.

Gosh, she couldn't believe Troy was so petty that he didn't want her to hang out with her friends.

She couldn't believe that she had let him *win*. She had half a mind to hunt him down and beat him up. Hopper had taught her self-defence. El figured she could take Troy .

But Mike's face came to her mind. She couldn't bear to see him hurt again. She couldn't bear to see any of her friends hurt, so deep down, she knew she had made the right choice. No matter how much it made her heart wretch when she spoke those *lies* about her friends.

It was better they were safe than hurt.

It honestly made her want to cry.

Why did Troy have to be such a jerk? Where did he get off, hurting *good people*? Mike and her friends didn't deserve this. They were so much better than that jackass.

She sighed, wiping a lone tear from her cheek. Apparently thinking of someone hurting her friends made her more emotional.

El walked around the corner, trying to mentally psych herself up to see Mike again. She almost ran right into Mike.

He was standing in front of her, his injured hand shaking beside him. It seemed like his whole *body* was trembling.

"Mike?" El gasped. "What are you-"

"Save it." He interrupted, his voice cracked and El could see him struggling to hold in tears. "I thought you were my *friend*. I heard what you said. About us. About *me*."

"No, it's not-"

"I said I don't want to hear it." Mike spat. "You were just *using us*? Were you ever *actually* our friend? *My friend*?"

El held her hand up, wanting to cup his cheek and brush his tears away. A few had dropped down as he talked. She wanted to rush up to him and pull him into a hug.

"It was Troy! He-"

"I thought you were different." Mike said. He repeated it again, whispering. "I thought you were different..."

El didn't bother holding back her tears now. They came flowing in hot streaks down her cheeks. All of the emotions and feelings that were pent up from her conversation with Troy burst free, revealing themselves now.

"Mike-"

"I gotta go." He muttered. "Tutoring is cancelled today."

El watched as he turned around and stalked down the hallway.

"Mike!" She called to him.

He didn't turn around.

"Mike!" She took a few steps forward, reaching out. He wasn't coming back and El was in no condition to chase him. She leaned against the locker beside her.

"Mike?"

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

El rushed home, locking herself in her room. She crashed into her bed, covering every part of her body with her pillows and blankets, hiding herself from the world.

She felt terrible. Tears welled in her eyes and she feebly wiped them away.

How could she have said those things about her friends? How could she have let Troy manipulate her into saying things she didn't believe?

And yes, she knew that she only said those things so Troy wouldn't hurt Mike and the guys, but did it really matter since *El* was the one to hurt him? She tried to protect them from someone who would hurt

them, when in the end, it was her that hurt them instead.

She felt weak and used.

She felt so many things all at once. All of her emotions crashing into her, weighing her down. Her unresolved feelings for Mike and how much she cared for him adding to that weight like an anchor.

Mike...

She hadn't even considered how Mike felt. Sure, he was mad. That was pretty obvious. But she broke his trust. She broke the entire group's trust for saying stuff which wasn't true. How was Mike even feeling right now? If it was El, she'd be devastated.

And El *was* devastated, but for different reasons.

All because of Troy.

She needed to talk to them. She needed to explain why she said what she did. El couldn't live with herself if Mike and the guys believed she secretly hated them, only using them for a passing grade.

She tried to call Mike twice, but he didn't pick up either time. El wanted to explain everything to him. Her conversation with Troy, the threats he made and how she only said those terrible things to protect Mike and his friends.

El wanted to tell him how much him and his friendship meant to her

But he didn't really want to talk right now.

El found herself habitually checking her phone for any sign from Mike, whether it's a missed text or a phone call. Neither came, however, and El decided it'd probably be better for her mood if she wasn't constantly checking to see if Mike had replied.

She threw her phone across her bed, out of arm's reach and turned the television in her room on.

A rerun of a particularly bad soap opera was on. It seemed appropriate for her mood, she decided to keep it on.

Her tears continued to stream and El let them, occasionally wiping them away with the blanket as she tried her hardest to focus on the soap opera in front of her.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

After the third or fourth rerun of soap opera after soap opera, it had gotten to a point where El was just blankly staring at the television. Whatever words the characters were saying were just background noise. Images flashed in front of her eyes and the characters' voices droned on but she wasn't really paying any attention to it.

The only thing she could think about was the look of betrayal on Mike's face and how *she* had caused it.

The crying had stopped and the emotions were slowly fading away. She felt numb.

El registered the click and open of the front door but didn't bother reacting, continuing to stare at the television.

A knock on her bedroom door shook El out of her stupor. She turned to see her dad poking his head through the door.

"Hey kid, you didn't answer my calls—" He said, before halting once he got a proper look at her.

El didn't mean to ignore Hopper, but she threw her phone across her room to ease the sense of panic she felt.

"Sorry..." El croaked, her cracking voice barely above a whisper. She didn't meet Hop's eyes.

"Kid, what's wrong?" Hopper gently said, rushing to take a seat beside El on the bed. He placed an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into him.

El's resolve broke and she sobbed in response, accidentally wiping her tear-stained eyes on Hop's shoulder. She probably looked terrible right now, with a runny nose and tears streaming down her face.

"T-things aren't good with, uh, Mike, right now."

"Mike?" Her father repeated. "Did he hurt you?"

"N-no." El faltered and shook her head. "I...I hurt him."

El explained what happened after school between her and Troy, and then between her and Mike.

"Did Troy specifically say he would *hurt* Mike and his friends if you continued hanging out with them?" Her father interrogated, entering *cop mode*, as she called it.

"I can't really remember exactly." El shook her head. "I just know he implied that Mike and his friends could get hurt or something if I hang around them."

"Well, I'll bring him to the station." Hopper suggested. "Maybe that'll be enough to scare him."

"Do whatever you can to Troy, he's been harassing Mike and his friends for years."

"For years?" Her dad said, surprised. "He's probably been doing stuff like this to even more people, then."

"Probably." El commented, trying not to focus on *Troy* too much.
"What do I do about Mike?"

"Oh..." Hopper said, scratching the back of his neck. "Have you tried talking to him?"

"He won't answer my calls."

"Maybe you just need to give it some time." Hopper suggested. "Trust me, kiddo. That kid is crazy about you. He'd be a fool to not listen to you."

El sighed. "Thank you."

"Anytime." Hop said. "I was gonna make dinner, but I think it'd be more appropriate to make some waffles? If you want me to?"

El smiled. Hop only ever offered to make *homemade* waffles when she wasn't feeling well. "That sounds amazing. Thank you."

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

The waffles helped, but El's emotions started creeping to her forefront again.

El laid on her bed, staring blankly at her ceiling. She didn't know what to do right now. Talking to her dad had helped. It allowed her to release some of the emotions she was feeling. But there was still about a hundred more things swelling up inside of her and she didn't know how to cope.

Guilt being one of the more prominent things she was feeling right now.

She considered calling Mike again. She had already tried calling him three or four times. El doubted he wanted to talk right now, though.

But El *really* wanted to talk right now. She had to explain herself. To explain that it was just bad timing and he didn't hear the full conversation between her and Troy. She only said those things to protect him and his friends. *Her* friends.

El grabbed her phone, navigating to her contacts, finding Mike's name and hovering over it before going to Max's instead.

El's phone rang as she waited for Max to answer the call.

"Hey. What's up?" Max asked.

"Mike and I got in a fight." El said, her voice cracking.

"Why?" Max pressed, sounding concerned. "What happened?"

El quickly explained what had happened between her and Mike.

"I was just trying to protect him and the guys!" El defended, trying to explain herself.

"I believe you." Max reassured her. "Is there anything I can do? What do you need?"

"He won't answer my calls or texts." El explained. "I need you to talk to him or... Lucas! Convince Lucas to get Mike to hear me out or something... Anything..."

She probably sounded crazy or desperate or something, but El didn't care.

"Well, from Mike's point of view, you said some pretty terrible stuff--"

"But I was..."

"But you were just trying to protect him, I know." Max continued on. "But he probably just needs time, right now. To process and to relax. You need some time, too."

"Okay... That's what my dad said, too." El agreed. "I'll try. Are you gonna talk to Lucas, though?"

"I will tomorrow at school, when things have cooled down a bit."

"Thank you." El said. "I really appreciate it."

"Anytime." Max said. "And don't worry. Once you're able to explain things, I'm sure Mike will understand."

El hoped so.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

El eagerly waited in her Calculus class for Mike to show up. She'd be able to explain everything, Mike would forgive her and she wouldn't feel so bad all the time.

But she waited and waited and he didn't show up. Even after the late bell rang, the seat in front of her stayed empty. She thought maybe he was just late, that he'd show up halfway through the class with the excuse of sleeping in, or something.

But as class went on, it became clearer and clearer that he was avoiding *her*. Or maybe he just didn't show up to school today.

El tried to hold in her disappointment. She didn't blame Mike for skipping. If she was in his position, she probably would've skipped too.

But she couldn't stop herself from feeling disappointed either.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

As Calculus class ended, and El was about to leave, Mrs. Sanders called out to her.

El looked over to where she was sitting behind her desk.

"I'll wait for you outside." Max said. El watched her walk out of the class with everyone else.

El walked across the now empty classroom. "Yes, Mrs. Sanders?"

"Well, it's been about a week since I assigned Mike as your tutor." Mrs. Sanders said, oblivious to the look on El's face. "I wanted to know how that's going?"

El felt her eyes tearing up. It took everything in her *not* to cry.

"It's good." El squeaked. The lie weighing against her chest. "Things are going good."

"Well, that's good to hear." Mrs. Sanders said with a smile. "Enjoy your lunch."

El took that as her cue, and walked away.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

Throughout the day, the guys kept giving her looks.

El thought it was nothing, at first. She thought she was just imagining it.

But by the third glance from Dustin and Lucas in their Biology class, El started to suspect something.

She figured they already knew about what happened between her and Mike. They were his best friends, *of course* he would have told them about what happened.

But El couldn't decipher the looks on their faces. She couldn't figure out if they hated her or not. Every time she noticed them staring at her, their heads whipped back to the front of the class. And every time she tried to get their attention, to maybe talk and let her explain, they adamantly ignored her.

It was kind of irritating, really. She felt like she was on display at a zoo. Everyone watching her from arm's length, unable to interact with them.

It didn't help with all of the other emotions she was already feeling due to the situation.

When lunch came around, El thought about going to the AV room. That's where all of the guys were probably going to be. She'd be able to talk to them without interruption and they conveniently wouldn't be able to go anywhere since there was only one exit to the AV room.

"What do you think?" El asked Max as they walked out of Calculus.

"About what?"

Oh, right. She hadn't said what she was thinking aloud. "Should we go to the AV room so I can explain my side of things?"

"You could, yeah..." Max slowly nodded, as if she was thinking it over. "Do you know what you'd say? It doesn't really seem like any of the guys wanna talk to us right now."

"Well, that's because they slip into the crowd as soon as we get close to them." El explained. "But if we trap them in the AV room..."

Max sighed. "You want to trap them in the AV room and force them into listening to you?"

"Yes! Exactly." El nodded. "But, uh, we don't *need* to trap them, per se... You could just stand by the door and look intimidating."

"Me?"

"Well, compared to me... You're a lot more intimidating." El shrugged. "And I've been crying and stuff. I can't block the door, or anything."

"So let me get this straight." Max said. "You think the best idea is to *intimidate* and *trap* the people you're apologizing to?"

El gaped. That was *exactly* what she had suggested they do. "Oh my god... That's a terrible idea."

"Let's just try talking to them like normal people first." Max suggested. "If that doesn't work, then we'll talk about the trapping thing."

"Maybe we should eat first?" El said. "I feel like if things don't go well they won't let us stick around to have lunch."

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

They walked to the AV room and El stepped forward to knock on the door. Her raised fist hesitated as she held a breath. Maybe Mike would be in there? Maybe he decided to come to school for the last half of the day.

Doubtful, she thought.

El knocked on the door and waited a second, opening it when no one answered.

Will, Lucas and Dustin were sitting around the table, eyes wide open and cautiously glancing at each other. No Mike.

El froze, not sure what she should say. On the walk over she had gone over her plan in her head. She would profusely apologize, for *everything*, and then ask if they would let her explain.

But the air was silent, except for the sound of Max's footsteps as she walked into the room behind El.

"Sup?" Max said, looking around and breaking the silence.

Lucas was the first to say something. "Uh... Not much?"

Max gave El a *look*, as if to say: *Well, here's your opening. Don't mess it up.*

"Right..." El blurted. "I just want to apologize. Like, a lot. I said a lot of stupid things that I didn't mean. And I can explain if you'll let me."

El looked into their eyes, trying to show how sincere she was. She really cared about these people.

The boys looked around at each other. Will gave a tentative shrug while Dustin wildly flailed his arms in her direction. Lucas seemed to be the deciding factor, but he seemed to be focused on Max behind her.

Dustin shoved his shoulder, trying to get his attention.

"Right. Mike said you said a lot of *bad* things about us and about him. Even if you have a good explanation, Mike's hurt right now. He doesn't want to talk to you right now." Lucas said.

"We shouldn't even be talking to you right now." Dustin continued.

Inconveniently, the bell rings, signalling the end of lunch.

El frowned.

"We should get going..." Dustin said, standing up and grabbing his things. "We've got class... and stuff."

Dustin made his way to the door, Lucas following. Will was still at the table looking at El.

She pleaded to him with her eyes, asking for just a chance.

"Will, you coming?" Dustin said, stopped at the door.

He shook his head and started gathering the art supplies on the table.
"Yeah, just gotta get my art stuff. I'll be there."

"Alright. I'll see you after." Dustin said, before leaving.

Lucas went to leave, too, but Max grabbed his arm and pulled him in. She whispered something indiscernible in his ear.

El tilted her head, but Max didn't elaborate.

Will had finished gathering his pencil crayons. He made his way to the door but El stepped in front of him, blocking him in.

"I thought we talked about the *trapping* thing." Max commented.

"What?" Will asked, moving to get by.

El stepped in front of him again. "Please, Will."

"I-I'm sorry, okay? I need to get to class." He said, looking down. "I shouldn't be talking to you."

"Then don't talk. Just listen." El said. "After English? Please? Just hear me out. Listen to my side. That's all I want."

Will was silent for a moment before he looked up. He sighed. "Fine."

A giant grin spread itself on El's face. She squealed. "Thank you!"

El felt momentarily happy. She pulled Will into a quick hug before releasing him after protests of being late to class.

"I'll see you at English." El said. "Thank you."

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

Fast forward to English and El couldn't contain herself. Slightly

nervous as to how Will would take her explanation.

Would he accept it? Would he forgive her?

El told herself that he would, repeating it to herself like a mantra. But in the back of her mind, doubts and insecurities stocked their way to her forethoughts. Did she even deserve to be forgiven? Would she forgive her if the roles were swapped?

What would happen if they didn't forgive her?

El tried not to think about it. But considering Max wasn't there to distract her and the noticeable absence of Mike in his regular chair somehow made her think even more of him... It was hard to think about anything else.

El needed this conversation to go well. She just had to explain what really happened. How Troy was manipulating her and she had only said those things to protect the guys.

She eyed Will at the front of the English class. He was reading *King Lear*.

El looked down at her copy of the book in front of her. She couldn't bring herself to read it without Mike.

El found herself waiting for the end of day bell to ring, bouncing up and rushing to Will when it finally came.

She continued waiting as he put his stuff away. They walked out of class in silence until they were alone.

"I'm sorry." El said. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

She stopped walking and turned towards Will. "You guys are some of the coolest, and most genuine people I've ever met. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt you."

"Then why'd you say those things?"

El explained the conversation between her and Troy. Why she said those things and what he said he would do to the guys.

"He basically said he would beat you up." El exclaimed. "He's an idiot. I shouldn't have done what he wanted me to..."

Will didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry..." El whispered, her voice hoarse. Explaining what happened had brought up the emotions she had worked so hard to suppress. She felt a tear roll down her cheek and before she knew it, there were more.

El silently sobbed. "I don't care about my grades. I'm not using you to pass. I'm sorry."

Will pulled her into a hug. "It's okay. I forgive you."

El looked up.

"I believe you." Will continued. "Troy has done worse to us in the past."

"You believe me?" El asked in disbelief.

"Yes." He nodded. "Look, I'll try to talk to Mike. Maybe convince him to talk to you?"

"You'd do that?"

"Of course." Will said. "You're our friend, too."

El sobbed in relief, pulling Will into another hug.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

El paced around her room. Thoughts of all kind were floating around her head.

She felt happy since Will believed her. He forgave her and is willing to try to help her. It truly showed Will's generosity.

But guilt and sadness still bored into her. She felt numb and anxious.

El shook her head, trying desperately to clear *any* thoughts from her head. This always happened when she was left to her own devices.

If El was given the opportunity to sit and wallow in her emotions alone, she would.

She needed a distraction.

El glanced around her room and Mike's shirt jumped into her vision. It was neatly folded and washed, this time placed on her desk.

She used to pick it up and feel comforted. The shirt was *very* Mike. It smelled like him. It reminded her of him.

But as she continually wore it and washed it, the scent was fading.

Kind of like her connection with Mike, slowly disappearing until it's gone, and there's nothing she can do about it.

She debated with herself if she should put it on. Maybe it would comfort her like it always had. Maybe it'd be a harsh reminder of the terrible things she said.

El quickly slipped the shirt on, covering herself with the blankets on her bed. It seemed to be more comforting than not, and she quickly fell asleep.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

El hoped this school day would be better than yesterday's. Maybe Mike would even show up, who knows?

They'd be able to talk, if he wanted to.

Mike hadn't returned her calls, which probably showed that he *didn't* want to talk. Which is why El was surprised when Mike showed up for Calculus.

El felt her heartbeat quicken as she looked at him. It had only been a day and a half since she's last seen him but he looked so different.

Eyes down, watching his shoes as he walked, like he was avoiding any and all eye contact.

Which, now that El thought about it, was what he was probably doing. He took his usual seat in front of her and didn't look at her or Max once, his eyes glued forward to the front of the class.

El turned around and faced Max, silently holding a conversation with her.

El raised her eyebrows at Max, *should I talk to him?*

Max only shrugged in response, *up to you.*

El stretched her leg forward and kicked the back of Mike's chair, trying to grab his attention. She waited for him to turn around like he always would.

He *always* turned around.

His head stayed put though, focused on the front of the class and El sighed.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

El called out to Mike as class ended, but he kept walking.

Using her deductive reasoning and logical thinking, El figured Mike still didn't want to talk to her. Which was a bit disappointing, but there wasn't much she could do about it right now.

She walked to the cafeteria with Max. Usually she would've had lunch with the boys in the AV room, but El didn't think her and Max would be wanted there right now.

They entered the cafeteria and took their usual table.

"Are you okay?" Max asked.

"No, not really." El admitted. "I just want things to go back to how

they were before. It was simpler then."

"You make it sound like a lifetime ago." Max laughed. "It's been two days."

"I know..." El sighed.

"Things will be fine." Max said. "Just give it some more time, like I said yesterday."

El mutely nodded.

"I talked to Lucas yesterday."

"What'd he say?" El asked, perking up.

"We talked it over and he said he'd ask Mike to hear your side of the story."

"That's good." El nodded. "Thank you."

"Anytime." Max smiled.

"Wait..." El said. "You were with me almost all day yesterday during school. When did you talk to Lucas?"

"Oh..." Max said, looking down. Her face had tinged a light shade of red. "We talked after school."

"Like, after school, after school?"

"Well, there isn't *that* many *after schools*..."

"Where did this *discussion* occur?"

"...At Benny's." Max replied.

"So you *talked* with Lucas at Benny's *after school*." El drawled on. "You basically went on a date!"

"We did not!"

El just tilted her head down, raising her eyebrows.

"Maybe we did..." Max admitted. "Are you okay with that?"

"What? Yes! I'm fine. That's awesome." El said. "I'm happy for you."

At least *one* of them was having some luck.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

El arrived to English early. She watched the door as students streamed into the class, hoping she'd see Mike.

Just as the bell rang, El saw him enter the class. She looked at him, hopeful. Maybe he'd sit beside her like he usually does?

She sighed as he rushed to sit beside Will, barely sparing a glance in her direction.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

El felt her heart break as she watched Mike pull out his own copy of *King Lear* and start reading on his own.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

El was so surprised when she saw Mike's name flash on her phone, she almost didn't answer the call.

She shook herself out of her stupor and manage to hit the answer call button.

"Hello?" El whispered, almost breathless.

"Uh, hey..." Mike awkwardly said.

"Hi..." El gasped. She hadn't heard Mike's voice in two days. The last time she did, was when they fought. She didn't say anything, just

reveling in the fact the Mike had called her. Maybe Will and Lucas had helped after all.

Mike cleared his throat. "Um, I'm not going to be in school tomorrow..."

"Yeah?" El asked, she felt disappointed. Was he only calling to tell her wasn't going to school again? "Is that why you called?"

"Yeah." Mike said, making El frown. "I was wondering if you could get me a copy of the homework again."

"Yeah. I can do that." She agreed. *All he wanted was the homework...* "Is that all?"

"Um, if you ask Will... During English if you ask him..." Mike repeated. "He can give you the rest of my homework for the day. Maybe you could drop it off at my house for me? If you're free, that is... We could, uh, we could talk after."

"We can?" El asked, hopeful. She wasn't sure whether or not she had heard him correctly.

"Uh, yeah. If you want. We can talk about... things." He confirmed.

"I would really like to talk about t-things." El's voice cracked. She felt a couple tears of joy roll down her cheek. All she's wanted the past two days is to talk to him. And now she finally had the chance.

"Are you crying?" Mike asked. "Is everything okay?"

"No, I'm- I'm fine." El reassured him. She wiped the tears from her eyes and smiled. "I'm just really glad you're willing to talk about... things with me."

Mike lightly chuckled. "Yeah... I guess I'll see you tomorrow then? I need to get back to doing homework with the guys..."

"Yeah." El agreed. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Neither of them said anything and El figured that was the point where they should hang up, but she couldn't bring herself to do it.

She lightly chuckled, slightly in disbelief. "Goodbye, Mike."

"Bye." He said, before hanging up.

El gently placed her phone down and sat on the edge of her bed. She was slightly in shock that *that* had just happened.

Mike had *called* her. This was amazing. *Holy shit*, this was amazing.

El thought he would've needed more time, after seeing how he was acting in school. He barely even spared a glance at her and all of a sudden he was calling her?

Will and Lucas had probably said something to help change his mind.

El felt happy, relieved and so much more all from one phone call. She was bouncing up and down on the side of her bed.

This was *amazing*.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

The next day, when Mike didn't show up for classes, it didn't seem to hurt her heart.

O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O.o.O

El was driving to Mike's house.

She had triple checked to make sure she had actually brought a copy of the homework for Mike. And when she was sure she hadn't forgotten anything she had started making her way to his house.

El was nervous. For the past twenty-four hours she had felt relief and excitement, but now that she was actually about to see Mike, to explain her side of the story and beg for his forgiveness, she felt like she was going to throw up.

Which was something new. She had felt a lot of different emotions and things over the past few days, ranging from happy to sad and pretty much everything in between. But she hadn't felt like she was going to puke.

The closest feeling she's had to this is when she had *actually* said those things about Mike and her friends. The thought of that had made her sick, but not *physically* sick.

Maybe El should've taken it as a warning. An omen of something bad to come.

But she didn't.

El yawned as her car came to a stop at a red light. She wasn't too far from Mike's house.

On top of everything she was feeling, she felt tired. Sleepy.

The nap she took yesterday, at the time, felt like a great thing to do. But it made it so she couldn't fall asleep for the rest of the night and she had been tired all day at school.

El yawned again, this time trying to rub the sleep from her eyes.

At least she could use the time she spent staring up at her ceiling to think about exactly what she would say to Mike. She could rehearse it to herself in her head because this apology *needed* to be perfect.

She needed to let Mike know how important he was to her. And not just because he was tutoring her.

The light turned green and El stepped on the gas.

She heard the honk of a horn as her vision went sideways. The sickening sound of crunching metal surrounded her.

She felt her body fly sideways but stay glued in her seat at the same time.

How was that possible?

El didn't know, but that was barely a concern for her at the moment.

The only thing she could think about was Mike.

Her body stopped spinning and the sound of the horn seemed to fade away. Her car was flipped on its side. Her windshield was shattered.

Mike won't... Mike won't get his homework... El thought as her vision started fading.

She *definitely* needed to throw up.

A pain she didn't know she had started flaring in her left ankle.

Her vision went black and El passed out.

alright. let me start this out by saying im sorry.

im sooooo sorry.

not just for that car crash thing but also for not uploading for 2+ months. in my defence, i didn't know where i wanted the story to go. also school started and university is ten times harder than high school:/

like seriously, university is SO much harder than high school. i get multiple quizzes every week, tests and assignments, too. it's way too much and i'm struggling to catch up. like, an hour ago, i just finished a TWELVE page paper. twelve pages of paper! shit is crazy man. shit is crazy. like, i could upload that paper to here, and have it be longer than some of my fics

anyway, i know that doesn't excuse it, but hopefully you'll understand

back to the fic.

i've been working on this one specific chapter ever since i uploaded the previous one. two months on one chapter (kinda crazy if you think about it, considering every other chapter was done in less than a week and i think some of them are a lot

better than this one, lol)

it's hard to write about angst and stuff like that when you aren't personally experiencing it imo. I've never been in El's position so I don't know how to handle it realistically. The best i can do is write about how i think she would react. that said, i didn't spend two months on this (even though i just said i did) I spent an hour or two from each weekend of the past two months working on it (which was all the time i could afford tbh i had sooo much school work)

its also made it hard to write the chapter since the last one was so long ago. like, at the time i had ideas and stuff floating through my head. my vision on where i wanted the story to go (after two months of deliberation, i *did* decide to include the car crash scene) I guess you know how i feel though, for some of you, it's been two months since you last read this fic. you've probably forgotten what's even happening (I know i did. I had to re-read the entire thing just so i could remember.)

id highly suggest you re-read the fic also (although looking back on it some parts make me cringe lol) i won't hold it against you if you don't lol. but two months is a long time and there might be smaller details you missed or forgot about. and no, this is not a ploy to get my account interaction up (although if it *does* get my account interaction up, hehehe:))

and who knows when chapter eleven is coming out? so by the time *that* rolls around, you might need to re-read *again*. this really is all part of my master plan huh?

i know that chapter eleven hasn't even been started yet, but i have a basic idea of how i want it to go. i'll try my hardest to get it finished before christmas. and when chapter eleven gets posted that'll be the final chapter.

kinda weird. *this* is the second-last chapter. only one chapter left.

probably.

there might be a lot of mistakes because i didn't give it a final read-through to check for stuff like that because i wanted to get this chapter out asap. i'll either do it later or i won't do it at all (sorry)

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anyway, pms are open if you ever wanna talk. all mistakes are mine, and i hope you all enjoyed :)